

Out of Her Mind

**Female Insanity from the 1890s to the 1970s on the Basis of
Women's Social History in "The Yellow Wallpaper", *The Bell Jar*,
and *Surfacing***

by

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Introduction

It has been claimed that madness is a “female malady”. This claim has been supported by the fact that women are statistically overrepresented among the mentally ill, as a consequence of their social situation, their limited and confining roles as daughters, wives and mothers, as well as their mistreatment by a male dominated psychiatric profession. Madness has been considered one of the inevitable liabilities, resulting both from female nature and nurture. In contrast, males were regarded all but immune against madness due to their alleged rationality¹. Aim of this thesis is to study the literary representation of madness, at three distinct points in time, among white, middle-class women in America. According to Elaine Showalter, these women represent the chief clientele for nervous disorder. Three essentially different literary works of North American literature serve as the basis for my discussion. They will be examined in light of the general perception of mental illness in the eras in which they were written. Even though the texts are very different from one another, they have in common that they are all written by and about white-middle class women in North America. My goal is to analyze the historical perceptions and changes of female psychology throughout three distinct time periods in American history, as these periods are represented in the individual texts. In addition, I should like to explore the common thread among the three time periods’ attitudes towards female madness. I also want to show how the individual stories reflect women’s social history at these times, and to what extent each case of madness described in the texts is related to the social environment of the affected person, as opposed to resulting from organic disease. My approach will be to explore the

¹ Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture*. London: Virago Press, 2007. P. 3.

significance of socially relevant themes such as marriage, motherhood, sexuality and male-female power relations, within the context of these writings. I hope to uncover to what extent each of the authors reflects and criticizes society's views on the role of women in general and female madness in particular. Finally, I should like to explore and compare the implied reasons for the three individuals' madness as they are portrayed by female writers of the time. In order to achieve this goal, it will be necessary to evaluate behavioral patterns that are both time and gender specific, and to gain a deeper knowledge of developments in psychiatry.

One of the most significant similarities between "The Yellow Wallpaper", *The Bell Jar* and *Surfacing* is that all three texts contain allegations of female writers that criticize social pressures imposed on them. Another common theme of these writings is a more or less open critique of how society treats women with psychiatric problems at different times. I should like to compare the texts in that regard. From this comparison I should like to draw conclusions concerning the validity of the historical claim that female madness is directly linked to the refusal to accept certain assigned gender roles, and to explore whether there may be additional time and gender specific factors.

Other aspects I will be looking at are the stylistic literary tools used in the presentations of female madness. In form of a "Madwoman", literary critic Elaine Showalter points out, literary figures often constitute the "author's double, the incarnation of her own anxiety and rage. It is through the violence of this double that 'the female author enacts her own raging desires to escape male houses and male texts.'"²

Trough out my paper I will be referring to and examining claims made by feminist critic Elaine Showalter in her book *The Female Malady*, as well as Phyllis Chesler in her book *Women and Madness*. I will also be looking closely at the medical

² Showalter. P.4.

aspects of the texts as they depict the possible organic nature of the madness. This will be achieved by examining theories and practices of leading physicians at the time such as, for example, the inventor of the rest cure, doctor Weir Mitchell in the nineteenth century, and anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing in the 1970s.

Chapter One

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

"Scribbling Women" – Late Nineteenth Century Female Literature

Even though a woman - Anne Bradstreet - was amongst the first American poets, women were generally not noticed as writers in the United States prior to the nineteenth century. Female writers were considered insane and their literary aspirations immoral. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, it became more acceptable for a woman to compose prose or poetry, as long as it represented a certain genre. This genre was the so-called domestic literature, and as the prevailing type of female literature it was most present in the second half of the nineteenth century. The domestic novel aimed at portraying the ideal female in a home setting. Achieving a "perfect" female identity was depicted as the result of a woman's moral and emotional disciplinary actions towards herself.³ Being able to discipline her own selfishness was considered the ultimate objective for a young woman. The protagonist of the story I shall be discussing in this chapter, knows this need for self control, as she explains: "[...] so I take pains to control myself – before him, at least, and that makes me very tired."⁴ In these domestic texts, the female protagonist's ability to control her personal desires and secret dreams was awarded with social acknowledgement and thus happiness and self-fulfillment. Selfishness was the worst possible insult to a woman⁵, and activities such as daydreaming and writing for personal pleasure were considered self-centered behavior.

³ Zapf, Hubert. ed. *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004. P. 196.

⁴ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *"The Yellow Wall-paper" and Other Stories*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998. P. 2.

⁵ Zapf. P. 196.

As the century moved towards an end, the struggle for female self-determination and the rejection of the so-called “Cult of Domesticity”, which will be discussed further down, became more and more visible. The expression of female desire for independence, self-realization and freedom, began to emerge in works such as *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and “A New England Nun” by Mary Wilkins Freeman. Along with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, these texts present attempts by women to free themselves from their traditional role allocations. Late nineteenth century literature by female writers frequently illustrated the battle for a new concept of femininity and a revised perception of women’s roles in society. In many cases, the quest for self-determination remained unrecognized by the respective female protagonist. The quest was typically depicted as a vague and undefined conflict rather than a self-reflective effort. Kate Chopin’s short story “The Story of an Hour” is a case in point. The protagonist of the story seems to be overwhelmed with grief after having learned that her husband has passed away. However, it turns out in the course of the story that her husband’s death actually means liberation for the woman. She gradually realizes this and secretly starts making plans for her life as a “free” woman. Therefore, when her husband suddenly turns up alive, the wife is so shocked that she dies. Her death is interpreted by her surroundings as her being overwhelmed with joy. In Chopin’s novel *The Awakening*, the protagonist takes her own life as an act of ultimate liberation from the external compulsion by the society she finds herself trapped in. Her suicide is an act of desperation but in a sense also a triumph of self-determination. Taking off her clothes before swimming out into her own death connotes a metaphorical act of stripping off social norm and pressure in order to be left with only one’s personal identity as an individual human being. Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” were published in the same decade. There are several similar themes in the

two texts. Both texts are set in a summerhouse getaway and they both address matters such as motherhood, marriage and women struggling with their identities. Another aspect the two texts have in common is the influence and significance of the husbands. Both of them are neither intentionally cruel to their wives, nor do they realize that their deeds are harmful. Yet, both husbands are essentially "killing with kindness"⁶, and their decisions are to be blamed for the one woman's suicide and the other's complete loss of sanity.

So it was difficult for a woman to express herself in an artistic manner at the end of the nineteenth century. Writing about a taboo such as female insanity, and at the same time criticizing both the institution of marriage and the male-dominated profession of psychiatry obviously made publication even more difficult. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", which does exactly that, was rejected by the influential magazine *Atlantic Monthly*, even though Gilman had received support from a well-known male author. William Dean Howells had sent a copy of the text to the editor Horace Scudder. Scudder responded with a short note to Gilman, where he claimed that publishing the text would be harmful to his readers: "Dear Madame, Mr. Howells has handed me this story. I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I made myself!"⁷ Howell's response to this rejection was to print the story in his collection *Great American Stories*. He introduced it with the ironic claim that it was "too terribly good to be printed"⁸. This shows how much female authors at the time were still dependent on support by male authors in order to get their work published. However, the initial rejection by Scudder shows that female madness, especially combined with critique of men, was not an accepted theme for a woman to write on. Nevertheless, many women were in fact writing about their own or others' experiences with madness. Female madness had been a subject

⁶ "The Role of Women in the 19th Century". 5 Apr 2003. Matthew Brundage Publications. 23 May 2007. <http://mattbrundage.com/publications/women-19thcentury.html>

⁷ Shumaker, Conrad. "'Too Terribly Good to be Printed' Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *Context for Criticism*. Ed. Donald Keeseey. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2002. P. 122.

⁸ Ibid. P. 122.

of interest to numerous authors prior to Gilman. In the Gothic, the madwoman was a symbol of the uncanny. Both male and female authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Charlotte Brontë, portrayed insane women in their texts. While their purpose with these characters was rather a symbolic use of gothic attributes, it may also be seen as a reflection of an increase in female malady during the nineteenth century.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” - A Mirror of Victorian Women’s Lives

Even though Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper” is relatively short, it still provides a vast amount of information about female lives and can therefore be claimed to portray the situation of many white, middle class American women in the late nineteenth century. “The Yellow Wallpaper” reflects the Victorian Era and its gender roles, which in line with Victorian ideals, strictly separate male and female domains. In her short story, Gilman describes the despair of a young intellectual woman, whose creativity, intellect and personal freedom are, more or less unknowingly, suppressed by her husband. In the male-dominated universe of the Victorian age, having her own opinions and ideas was considered redundant for a married woman. Being creative and using her imagination was inadmissible in marriage. At the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the protagonist, who is dedicated to writing, and who had been suffering from a slight depression, loses all touch with reality. This is depicted as the result of her complete dependence on her husband’s decisions, which implies that the protagonist is without any possibility of self-realization. Due to her depression, the protagonist is forced to stay in a rented house for an entire summer. Not being allowed to move freely or to engage in any kind of activity, the stay is similar to being locked up in prison or an asylum. According to the medical beliefs of the time, total restriction from any kind of intellectual or physical work served the purpose of recovery from a woman’s depression

best. The nameless protagonist is repeatedly told by her husband to stop using her imagination and not to “give way to such fancies”⁹. Not being able to write or share her thoughts openly with her husband increasingly isolates the protagonist and contributes to her mental health getting worse. However, the husband fails to recognize the severity of his wife’s condition. According to literary critic Elaine Showalter, notions of gender not only influence the definition but also the treatment of mental disorders.¹⁰ The main focus of this chapter will be to draw a connection between the era’s societal characteristics, such as Victorian norms, attitudes and customs, and the contemporary treatment of women with psychological problems. It will be explored to what extent Victorianism influenced psychiatry, and how this may have resulted in mistreatment of mental illnesses.

Criticizing treatment forms received by women for mental health issues was a personal concern for Gilman. The author herself had been utterly sick and depressed throughout her entire pregnancy in 1884 and 1885.¹¹ Only a few months after giving birth to her daughter, Gilman handed the care for her baby to her own mother. Severe and reappearing depressions made it impossible for her to care for the child.¹² Since no external factors could seem to explain her growing discontent and despair, and post-partum depression was not a recognized disease at the time, Gilman began to fear that she suffered from a serious neurological problem or brain infection. Several months later, due to her worsening situation, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was sent to the famous women’s doctor S. Weir Mitchell. The encounter with Mitchell’s convictions of female psychology and forms of treatment was an experience that obviously contributed to

⁹ Gilman. p. 3.

¹⁰ Showalter. p. 5.

¹¹ Berkin, Carol Ruth. “Private Woman, Public Woman: The contradictions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Women of America. A History*. Eds. Berkin, Carol Ruth. Mary Beth Norton. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin College Div, 1979. p. 161.

¹² Ibid. p. 161.

Gilman's motivation to write "The Yellow Wallpaper". The extent to which Gilman saw Mitchell responsible for the mistreatment of herself and many other women will be discussed in more detail below.

Womanhood in the Late Nineteenth Century

In Victorian America at the closing of the nineteenth century, living conditions for women varied greatly depending on a woman's social class. It can be assumed that the unnamed protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" belongs to the middle or upper class. There is no indication in the text, which would suggest that she has to work outside the home in order to support her family. It can also be assumed that her main occupation is that of a housewife. The protagonist's husband is a "physician of high standing"¹³, which also is an indication of their upscale social status. Their financial situation allows them to rent an entire house, which the narrator describes as "[a] colonial mansion, a hereditary estate"¹⁴ for the summer. It is also indicated that the couple's child is being taken care of by servants while the protagonist is recovering.

Contrary to women of the working and lower classes, middle-class women were not expected to work outside the home. Instead, they were often taught certain domestic skills from an early age, either by their mothers or in special academies for women.¹⁵ The purpose of these schools was to prepare young women for marriage and their duties as wives. In addition to the academies and the tradition of passing on skills from one generation of females to the next, so-called "Ladies' Magazines" provided information

¹³ Gilman. p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid. p 1.

¹⁵ Lerner, Gerda. *The Woman in American History*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1971. p. 32.

about how the ideal woman should behave, dress and talk.¹⁶ Besides that, they provided religious, health, household- and child-rearing advice.

Throughout the 19th century and also towards the end of it, specific rules concerning a woman's position in society existed. Even though the perception of a woman's role was undergoing major changes as the century came towards an end, many traditional ideas which had manifested themselves throughout the century were still of great significance. There are numerous contemporary documents on how a woman was expected to appear and conduct herself. However, Mary Beth Norton advises to treat these records with caution before drawing conclusions about women's standing in society: "It is possible to understand the impact of the roles laid out for white women in nineteenth century America only through detailed studies of how individuals and groups of women were affected by the role expectations."¹⁷ Norton advises to closely study the authentic literature of the time, rather than relying exclusively on historical descriptions. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is one of these contemporary writings that provides a highly informative account of women's conditions of life at the end of the 19th century. The short story has been rightly referred to as a "carefully constructed portrayal of the social practices leading to the nervous breakdown of a middle-class woman"¹⁸.

Subordinate by Law – Women's Legal Status

"The Yellow Wallpaper" opens with the introduction of the protagonist and her husband as they arrive their country house. The narrating protagonist explains that her husband has rented the house for the duration of the summer. As mentioned before, the

¹⁶ Lerner, p. 32.

¹⁷ Norton, Mary Beth. "The Paradox of Women's Sphere". *Women of America. A History*. Eds. Berkin, Carol Ruth. Mary Beth Norton. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin College Div, 1979. p. 141.

¹⁸ *Late Nineteenth Century: 1865-1910. The Development of Women's Narratives; Regional Voices, National Voices*. 8 Jan. 2002. Georgetown University. 20 Mai 2007.
<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/lnineteen.html>

initial situation that the unnamed woman finds herself in not only reveals the couple's social status, but also gives several indications to what kind of lifestyle Victorian women of that social rank were expected to adhere to. At the beginning of the text it is quite obvious that it is not the woman's request to spend the summer in seclusion. Instead, the decision was made by her husband. She does not seem to be content with this situation, but apparently has not been given a choice and it is clear that she has no influence on her husband's decisions. "Personally, I disagree with their ideas"¹⁹, the protagonist tells the reader early in the text. She is referring to her husband and her brother, who both are physician, and their ruling that she should spend the summer in the isolation of the house. "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?"²⁰

Clearly, the protagonist has no influence on her own situation altogether, as she reports that she is given no say in where and how she wants to spend her time. The attempts of the protagonist to change this are fruitless:

I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with [John] the other day,
and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin
Henry and Julia.
But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there;
and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying
before I had finished.²¹

In that sense, she is evidently a victim of Victorian legal traditions. Men and women were immensely different in their legal positions at the time. Besides not being able to defy her husband's decisions from a social point-of-view, the protagonist also has no legal rights to resist. The revolutionary concept of human equality, as it emerged from

¹⁹ Gilman. p. 1

²⁰ Ibid. p. 1

²¹ Ibid. p. 7.

the American Revolution applied only to men.²² Women, however, had a poor legal standing in the Victorian Era. Few states allowed them ownership of property or gave them the right to vote. Once married, a woman was considered her husband's property and subject to his decisions. In addition to that, a woman's possessions were only hers as long as she was single, but became her husband's property as soon as she got married. This also included her potential earnings. Thus, even if a woman worked outside the home, this did not give her economic independence, according to Anglo-American common law²³. Married women also had no legal standing in court as they were legally tied to their husbands. Therefore, a woman's ability to engage in the economic world outside of her own home was highly restricted. A woman did not only need her husband's approval for all legal concerns, but her participation in the public sector was severely restricted by public laws. In the vast majority of the states, women were not allowed to vote. Their political incapability of action therefore also pushed them into the home. There, they were expected to attend to their roles as mothers and nurturers.

However, "[i]n the 1880s American women of [Charlotte Perkins Gilman's] race and region were experimenting with independence."²⁴ "The Yellow Wallpaper" can be interpreted as an indictment of women's legal status, as the protagonist's mental breakdown is not only the result of mistreatment and wrong medical assumptions, but at the same time, it also reflects a situation where a woman was completely dependent on her husband. She was expected to behave, and live, exactly as told by her husband. There are several hints in the text pointing to the fact that the tragic outcome could have been prevented had the narrator been allowed to make her own choices and determine herself what is best for her mental health, or at least have a say in it. The narrator does not feel

²² Lerner. p. 31.

²³ Cott, Nancy F. "Giving character to our whole Civil Policy: Marriage and the Public Order in the Late Nineteenth Century". *U.S. History as Women's History*. Ed. Kerber, Linda K. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995. p.111.

²⁴ Berkin. p. 159.

comfortable in the room, which had been chosen by her husband. The room repels the protagonist. Because it had been used as nursery and gym previously, it has elements such as barred windows and rings in the walls. This creates the atmosphere of a prison cell and intensifies the narrator's sense of being trapped in her situation. The symbolic manifestation of her deep aversion against being held in prison-like circumstances is her resentment of the wallpaper, which she describes as the worst kind of wallpaper she has ever seen. "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. [...] No wonder the children hated it" she comments on the paper shortly after having moved into the room. "I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long."²⁵ She urges John to let her move to a different room, but he refuses, leaving her – once more – without a satisfying explanation. He simply tells her that he knows best what is good for her. "“You know the place is doing you good,””²⁶ he tells her. The outcome of the story, however, clearly proves the opposite. Rather than helping her overcome her depression, he aggravates her increasing psychosis.

As Practical as Possible – Education for Women

Being female or male not only meant significant differences in legal status, but it also implied severe differences in the access to education. In the second part of the nineteenth century, basic education became available and even mandatory for both males and females. At the same time, the industrial revolution created an infinite number of factory jobs. However, more than ninety percent of women still stayed at home.²⁷ Mandatory education was limited to a basic level and the focus for girls and boys was kept on very

²⁵ Gilman p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

²⁷ Dorothy Hartman. "Life in the 1880's. Women's Roles in the Late 19th Century". Connor Prairie. 18 May 2007. <http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/1880wom.html>

different levels. The main focus for female education was on teaching young girls domestic skills. Other forms of education were perceived a threat to the domestic sphere. Higher degrees of education would potentially enable women to enter the job market, which was not generally accepted. Helen MacGill, who was Canada's first female judge and the first woman to be admitted to Trinity College, remarked the following:

The university classroom...was a milieu in which women seemed startlingly out of place. [To most Victorians,] the development of a girl's mind was superfluous; motherhood was considered her only important function, and family life her only satisfactory destiny. To send her to college would make her unfit for a passive role as wife and mother, and develop in her an objectivity which, though thought admirable in a man, was then considered awkward, unpleasant, and masculine in a woman.²⁸

There are several scenes in "The Yellow Wallpaper" which display that the protagonist's husband does not want his wife to engage in intellectual activities such as reading and writing. The narrator tells her story by means of a diary entry. Whenever her husband approaches, she quickly hides her journal: "There comes John, and I must put this away, --he hates to have me write a word."²⁹ It was considered unfeminine for a Victorian woman to be intellectually active. If the Victorian woman read, she would either pick up a ladies magazine or enjoy a novel or short story specifically aimed at the female reader. Having access to education and knowledge provides a certain degree of independence. The Victorian woman was not supposed to be independent, but rather rely entirely on her husband. Denying women an education beyond domestic skills therefore meant trapping them further in the home and consequently also making them more vulnerable to mental breakdowns. The restrictiveness and dependence made many Victorian women depressed and discontent, without being able to comprehend the origin of their unhappiness. The men that treated mentally ill women in most cases made their conditions worse as they

²⁸ Caitlin Gal. "Education for Canadian Women in the Late Nineteenth Century." University of Stanford. 11 August 2007. http://womenslegalhistory.stanford.edu/papers/MartinClaraB_hc-Gall05.pdf

²⁹ Gilman. p. 1

did not recognize that male oppression of women was in many instances the root of the problem.

Married Life and the Cult of Domesticity

“I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes”³⁰ the narrator says. She does not comprehend why she develops such feelings, since she realizes that her husband is merely behaving in a way a caring and protective husband would. However, the fact that he never really listens to her, that he refuses to take her concerns seriously, but rather treats her like a child, triggers a subtle anger in her, which she is frightened by. From a Victorian Era point of view, the John’s behavior and actions are completely normal and in line with how a husband at the time was expected to behave. He could even be called a model husband. Therefore, the young woman does not understand herself why his “normal” behavior repels and bothers her. She blames what she conceives as “abnormal” emotional reactions on her medical condition. She projects the source of her anger into her own person rather than blaming the restrictiveness of her marriage. On the contrary, she blames herself for being unsatisfied with the living situation she is in, and the kind of lifestyle she is expected to live: “I have a scheduled prescription for each hour of the day; he takes all care from me, and I feel so basely ungrateful not to value it more”.³¹ From a modern day point of view, it is hardly surprising that a young woman feels this way about having every second of her day scheduled by someone else, and not having any say in it. The fact that John is a physician makes any kind of objection from the woman’s side even harder and even less likely to be successful.

³⁰ Gilman. p. 2

³¹ Ibid. p. 2

Albeit realizing that her condition is continuously getting worse, the protagonist still remains incapable of action. Her hands remain tied as her husband denies her right to her own decisions. He even places his sister in the house with the protagonist in order to have her under constant observation while he is away. Since John is a physician, he is in a position of added power over his wife. He is not only the natural decision maker by reason of his sex, and because of his social position as husband. He is also his wife's doctor and therefore empowered with the god-like reputation of his profession. As her physician, he represents the only outside person who might have a say in the protagonist's fate. Doctors were highly respected and had a great deal of influence in Victorian America. A physician's suggestion was generally taken seriously and followed strictly. The complete patronization of the protagonist by her husband builds up a sense of repression, anger and helplessness, and the protagonist is less and less capable of dealing with the mental and physical imprisonment, and the total dependence on her husband's will. "[The] inactivity make[s] the woman less able to assert her own needs without breaking down in tears."³² Elaine Showalter comments on the "The Yellow Wallpaper's" protagonist in her book *The Female Malady*. Due to her being trapped in this hopeless situation, her condition gets worse as time passes. She gets weaker and sicker and she loses all her energy to continue the little activity she had been pursuing before. She feels too weak to write in her journal, which had been her only comfort to her when she first arrived. "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. And I know John would think it is absurd. But *must* say what I feel and think in some way – it is such a relief!"³³ Not being able to write anymore, she spends more and more time staring at the wallpaper she despises so much. Eventually, the woman starts hallucinating as begins to see movements in the paper. First she sees an increasing

³² Showalter. p. 142.

³³ Gilman. p. 7.

amount of “strange” patterns, and finally she starts seeing people. Ultimately, the protagonist turns completely mad, ripping the hated paper off the wall, and creeping around in her room.

An influential Victorian social concept was the “Cult of Domesticity”. The concept appeared early in the nineteenth century and by the end of the century had developed into an essential and widely accepted notion concerning the female social role. It implied that women and their specific female skills and capabilities were of great importance, and that they should therefore play a central role in the home and within the family.³⁴ Furthermore, it was assumed that this “homemaker” role was rooted in a women’s biological and intellectual capacity. Adhering to this role meant making others, especially the husband, as comfortable as possible. The protagonist writes about the female role in her journal:

I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and
here I am a comparative burden already! Nobody would believe
what an effort it is to do the little I am able, -- to dress and entertain,
and order things.³⁵

The quote displays some of the duties of a housewife, such as entertaining and keeping order in the house. The Ladies Magazine *The Household*’s January 1884 edition says:

A really good housekeeper is almost always unhappy. While she
does so much for the comfort of others, she nearly ruins her own
health and life. It is because she cannot be easy and comfortable when
there is the least disorder or dirt to be seen.³⁶

A woman’s femininity was tied to her commitment in the home. The more she was running around cleaning, decorating, cooking and washing, the more feminine she was considered to be. She was expected to selflessly put the wellbeing and convenience of

³⁴ Hartman. <http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/1880wom.html>

³⁵ Gilman. P. 3.

³⁶ Hartman. <http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/1880wom.html>

others before her own needs. To do so was considered a basic female desire, which came naturally merely due to her biology.

The “Cult of Domesticity” also assumed that the role of mother and wife was the role that God had assigned to women. In addition to nurturing their children, serving their husbands, and running the household, women were also expected to educate their children in moral and religious issues, and to raise their daughters according to the concept of separate spheres. Separated spheres meant that a woman’s sphere, her workplace and duties, was clearly separated from the man’s. This applied largely also to women who worked outside their own home, as a considerable proportion of these women worked as domestic servants or in domestic related job. In the text, the husband’s sister, Jennie, serves as an example of a prototype Victorian woman. The narrator describes her sister-in-law as a “dear girl”³⁷, and “[...] a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, [who] hopes for no better profession”³⁸. Jennie seems to be utterly satisfied with her domestic role. At the same time, she is unable to understand the protagonist’s inner conflicts. Jennie has no comprehension for sister-in-laws desire to write and express herself, according to the narrator: “I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!”³⁹ In addition to representing the ideal Victorian female, Jennie also serves as an assistant to her brother, who is watching his wife’s actions at all times to make sure that she is following his strict orders. Rather than having a female friend to confide to, the narrator has to hide her writing from Jennie as well. This makes Jennie - the “Angel in the House”- an unknowing complicit in bringing down the protagonist’s mental health. The “Angel in the House”, a term coined by Virginia Woolf, is the “conventional woman who never had a mind or wish of her own but preferred to

³⁷ Gilman. p. 5

³⁸ Ibid. p. 5

³⁹ Ibid. p. 5.

sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others”.⁴⁰ This illustrates how the Victorian ideas and attitudes were deeply ingrained, even in the heads of most women. The protagonist herself struggles with grasping what is happening to her. She regards her inability to take care of her new-born baby, and to do any kind of housework, as a clear sign that there must be something seriously wrong with her. Of course, like her husband, she is not familiar with post-partum depression either. And the society she lives in has taught her to believe certain things about what kind of emotions are “normal” for a woman to feel. “Of course I didn’t do a thing.” She writes in her diary after having had her mother visit. “Jennie sees to everything now”⁴¹. It clearly troubles the narrator that she cannot attend to her domestic duties. The concern is so strong that she tries hard to obey the rules her husband has set up for her, all the while feeling more and more depressed. Like Gilman, who for the period of several months tried to strictly follow Dr. Mitchell’s therapy when struggling with post-partum depression, the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” finds herself “domestically disabled”⁴².

“The Yellow Wallpaper”, portrays a true-to-life picture of a Victorian marriage and the relationship between husband and wife. Gilman demonstrates how male and female attitudes differed at the time, with severe consequences for the wellbeing of a sensitive woman such as the protagonist. At the beginning of the text, the protagonist makes several remarks about her position as a wife and the lack of influence she has on her husband. On the first page of the story, the narrator mentions, with slight irony, how little freedom of choice she has. “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage”⁴³ she writes. Then she goes on to repeating the same question three times

⁴⁰ Russell, Denise. *Women, Madness and Medicine*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002. p. 139.

⁴¹ Gilman. p. 5.

⁴² Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 68.

⁴³ Gilman. p. 1

during the course of the next sentences. “And what can one do?”⁴⁴, then “[...] what is one to do?”⁴⁵ and “But what is one to do?”⁴⁶. She indicates that she has different views on certain things, but that these views are of no relevance to her husband. The narrator points out how small her influence over her husband is, and how she may not make any of her own decisions, even on issues concerning her own person. She is left to rely on the correctness of her husband’s diagnosis. She has to accept his proposed form of treatment, even when she is quite aware of the fact that she disagrees with him. As early as on page three, the narrator indicates that her husband does not realize how sick she really is. “But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing,” she writes in her diary. “John does not know how much I suffer. He knows that there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.”⁴⁷ This quote shows that the mistreatment the protagonist received is due to pure ignorance on the side of her husband. He does not recognize her post-partum depression, as it is not a known form of illness at the time. He also seems to know little about psychology or psychiatric diseases. It becomes clear in this context that it is both the patriarchal structure of Victorian society and the low knowledge of psychiatry that contribute to the worsening condition of the protagonist. John seems to at no point be doubting his treatment. The narrator is even told explicitly not to think about her own condition: “John says the very worst thing I can do is think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house.”⁴⁸ On several occasions, the husband tells the protagonist how to behave and what to think, or rather, not to think about: “He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction”⁴⁹ suggest that John tells his wife exactly what to do at all times.

⁴⁴ Gilman. p. 1

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 1

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 1

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid. P. 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid. P. 2.

Another characteristic of the relationship between the narrator and her husband is the extent to which he infantilizes her. He does not only tell her how to spend her time, where and with whom, but he also addresses her as if she was a child. John calls his wife “a blessed little goose”⁵⁰ and “little girl”⁵¹, and he talks to her in the third person as one would with a child: “Bless her little heart! She shall be as sick as she pleases!”⁵². The infantilization is another indication to how distinct the roles of wife and husband were in the Victorian marriage. The husband was considered to be intellectually superior to his wife, resembling the relationship of a father to his child.

The Victorian Mother

At the end of the nineteenth century, a woman was for the most part defined not only through her role as obedient wife but also through her role as caring mother. Sheila Rothman writes in her book *Woman's Proper Place, A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present*: “In the 1880s, child rearing manuals gave primacy to notions of maternal instincts and the innate and all-beneficial effects of motherly affection”.⁵³ While women considered their roles as mothers the duties that their sex brought with them, men were romanticizing women as freely and willingly sharing these nurturing services and emotions due to their nature. Female commitment to motherhood was seen as a biological fact rather than a social concept.

However, birth rates dropped significantly in nineteenth-century America. Even though modern forms of reliable contraception were not available at the time, many women began to keep the size of their families limited by either observing fertile phases in their cycle or by staying abstinent. The severe drop in birth rates, especially amongst

⁵⁰ Gilman. P. 4.

⁵¹ Ibid. P. 8.

⁵² Ibid. P. 8.

⁵³ Rothman, Sheila M. *Women's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present*. New York, NY: Basic Books. 1978. p. 178.

white middle-class women, was a sign of a growing sense of self-determination amongst the women. This reflects that women increasingly desired to lead lives, which were not exclusively based around child rearing. This growing sense of self-determination became subject of great concern for certain political groups. It was feared that the decline of birthrates would jeopardize the dominance of the white Anglo-Saxon American population. In examining Gilman's story, this rapidly changing concept of motherhood can be noticed as well. The protagonist does not only seem to suffer from a post-partum depression, but seems to be concerned with her desire to write and might sense unconsciously that the child she has just given birth to is threatening her ability to pursue her passion. The baby is only ever briefly mentioned in the text: "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby", it says on page three. "And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous."⁵⁴ Of course, this could to a large extent be blamed on the protagonist's depression. However, the reader gets the impression that if she were well, the woman would see to numerous other activities first, rather than spending all of her time with her newborn baby. She mentions that she longs for social contact, discussions with her friends and being able to write openly.

Hysteria, Rest Cure and Wondering Wombs - Concepts and Treatments of Female Mental Illness

While women had been forced to live in mental institutions and asylums as far back as the seventeenth century, there was a rapid increase of female patients in the mid-nineteenth century. Women started to predominate the mental institutions and this phenomenon began to draw attention.

⁵⁴ Gilman. p. 4

When introducing herself and her current situation, the narrator and protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” gives away a number of details about the type of cure she has been subjected to: “So I take phosphates or phosphites - whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again.”⁵⁵ She also instantly makes a statement about her view of the situation, stating that she disagrees with her husband’s choice of treatment. “[...] Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.”⁵⁶ The narrator also seems to have an explanation for her husband’s behavior, as she claims that “[...] he does not believe [she is] sick.”⁵⁷

The treatment the narrator is being forced to accept is the so-called “Rest Cure”. Conrad Shumaker comments on this type of cure in his essay “‘Too Terribly Good To Be Printed’: Charlotte Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”. He says that this treatment was designed for “the business man exhausted from too much work, and the society woman exhausted from too much play.”⁵⁸ The Rest Cure was mostly prescribed women who had been diagnosed with the medical condition of hysteria. Today this condition is no longer acknowledged by the medical community. However, in the Victorian era, it was a popular diagnosis for a wide array of “female” symptoms, including faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in abdomen, muscle spasm, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, and a “tendency to cause trouble”.⁵⁹ The protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is also prescribed a form of rest cure. She is essentially locked into a room with hardly any contact to other people, except for John and his sister. Most of the time, however, she seems to spend alone in the room. The protagonist desperately longs for social contact and companionship: “It is so

⁵⁵ Gilman. p.1.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.1.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.1.

⁵⁸ Shumaker. p. 122.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 122.

discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work.” Her husband does not allow her to see her friends. “[...] he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow case as to let me have those stimulating people about now”⁶⁰

Hysteria’s history can be traced back to ancient times; it was described by both the Greek physician Hippocrates and the philosopher Plato. An ancient Greek myth tells of the uterus, wandering throughout a woman’s body, strangling the victim as it reaches the chest and causing disease. Hence, this theory is the source of the name *hysteria*, which is the ancient Greek word for uterus. The idea of the “Wondering Womb” developed because madness was considered associated with menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. The womb itself was deemed to wander throughout the body, acting as an enormous sponge, which sucked the life-energy or sanity from vulnerable women.⁶¹ Thus, women became synonymous with madness, as they were deemed to be emotional and unstable. If a woman of the Victorian era had an outburst of emotion due to discontent or repression, she would be deemed mad. The word *hysteria* became the general term for women with mental illness. Of course, it was men who defined the disease. Treatment forms included “cures” such as the bed rest the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” prescribed, seclusion, bland food, refrain from mental activities such as reading and writing, daily massage, and sensory deprivation. It was common to banish all sorts of meat from the women’s diet as meat was considered a typical “male” form of food, the traditional food of warriors and soldiers, which was thought to trigger aggression and lust. Even though these treatments may not seem too appalling, they were comparable to solitary confinement and would often drive a woman to further insanity.⁶²

⁶⁰ Gilman. p. 4.

⁶¹ Ussher, Jane M. *Women’s Madness*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991. p. 74

⁶² Frick, Katie L. “Women’s Mental Illness. A Response to Opression”. 18 May 2002. The University of Texas At Austin. 9 June 2007. <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/femhist/madness.shtml#VicEra>

Hysteria was originally conceived of as an exclusively female complaint. It was in many cases simply considered the fate of women. Women in the nineteenth century were deemed to be highly susceptible to “losing their minds” as they were considered to be of inferior mental capacity. The risk of mental disease would grow if a woman attempted to better herself through education or too much mental activity. In fact, women were considered most likely to experience mental breakdowns sometime during their lifetime out of biological necessity, as “the maintenance of [female] sanity was seen as the preservation of brain stability in the face of overwhelming physical odds”.⁶³ Thus, women often suppressed their feelings, in order not to appear mad, and adapted the passive role of a housewife and mother.⁶⁴ The fear of being labeled as “unfeminine”, even by other women, also explains why it is so difficult for the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” to confide to her sister-in-law, and why it is virtually impossible for her to do her writing openly.

Silas Weir Mitchell was one of the main proponents of the hysteria therapy method involving the cure by rest. He was an American physician who had become famous for his treatment of nervous disorders. Gilman herself was treated by him, and according to his therapeutic ideas. Mitchell describes and justifies his choice of therapy for women diagnosed with hysteria in the 1877 book *Fat and Blood*. His description of the Rest Cure reveals how strict and rigorous the conditions for those undergoing the treatment were:

In carrying out my general plan of treatment it is my habit to ask the patient to remain in bed from six weeks to two months. At first, and in some cases for four or five weeks, I do not permit the patient to sit up or to sew or write or read. The only action allowed is that needed to clean the teeth. In some instances I have not permitted the patient to turn

⁶³ Ussher, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Frick. <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/femhist/madness.shtml#VicEra>

over without aid, and this I have done because sometimes I think no motion desirable, and because sometimes the moral influence of absolute repose is of use. In such cases I arrange to have the bowels and water passed while lying down, and the patient is lifted on to a lounge at bedtime and sponged, and then lifted back again into the newly-made bed. In all cases of weakness, treated by rest, I insist on the patient being fed by the nurse, and, when well enough to sit up in bed, I insist that the meats shall be cut up, so as to make it easier for the patient to feed herself.⁶⁵

From modern knowledge of a post-partum or clinical depression, the cure-by-rest concept of Victorian physicians seemed not only frivolous, but potentially even harmful. Having been a personal target of this type of treatment, Charlotte Perkins Gilman became aware of its negative effects on her own psyche, motivating her to draw attention to its potential harm. In her self-published magazine *The Forerunner*, which appeared from 1909 until 1916, Gilman vividly describes an episode of acute depression she experienced in 1887. She consulted Dr. Mitchell, who prescribed the Rest Cure for a month's duration. Thereafter, she was sent home with the advice to lead a proper domestic life and not spend more than two hours a day reading.⁶⁶ Gilman was also told by Mitchell to give up her writing entirely. Instead, she was advised to invest her energy into being a mother and housewife. Gilman did as she was told for some months, until her condition became so bad that she decided to stop obeying her doctor's orders. She sensed that otherwise, she would completely lose her mind and self-esteem.

⁶⁵ Mitchell, Weir S. University of Massachusetts. 13 June 2007
<http://www.unix.oit.umass.edu/~clit121/weirmit.html> p. 1

⁶⁶ Showalter. p. 140.

... Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained... I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again- work, the normal life of every human being ...ultimately recovering some measure of power.

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" ... and sent a copy to the physicians who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it ... [But] many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of this that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading "The Yellow Wallpaper".⁶⁷

The protagonist does not have the opportunity to escape the mistreatment as Gilman had had. She undergoes several attempts to be heard by her husband, who simply ignores her objection. "He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have the perfect rest and all the air I could get."⁶⁸ In the beginning, when she is merely slightly depressed, the protagonist sees clearly that the treatment is making her condition worse. Her depression intensifies gradually. "I don't feel as if it was worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous. I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time."⁶⁹ And a bit later, she says: "It getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness I suppose."⁷⁰ Eventually, she becomes too sick to continue protesting and she loses her ability to judge her own situation. She claims to be feeling better and better while obviously going insane. "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be,"⁷¹ the protagonist claims, showing that she has reached a manic state in her depression. And she is clearly beginning to lose her ability to think rationally, which is also reflected by her increasing paranoia: "The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look."⁷² At the same time, she claims: "I am feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep

⁶⁷ Showalter. p. 141.

⁶⁸ Gilman. p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 6.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 10.

⁷² Ibid. p. 9.

much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments.” She is referring to the wallpaper which she watches for hours and which she hallucinates about. “There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.”⁷³ Not only her seeing, but also her other senses are being baffled. The protagonist starts to think that she can smell the paper. The imagined smell terrifies her so much that she “[...] seriously thought of burning down the house.”⁷⁴ Undoubtedly, the protagonist is seriously ill at this point. Still, her husband and sister-in-law seem to take no notice of her psychotic condition, despite the fact that they live in the same house and must notice the change in her mental health. John upholds the aggravating therapy until his wife has gone completely mad.

In Retrospect- Late Nineteenth Century Psychiatry

Mental illness during the Victorian era revolved around the empowerment of men. It has been claimed that the concept of “hysteria” was fuelled by a fear of the intellectual woman. Like the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, who is not allowed to read or write, women were denied tasks such as reading or social interaction, and many women obeyed these rules, either because they had no choice or out of fear of becoming a hysteric. In order to avoid this social stigma, women were forced to accept the stereotypical role of passive housewife. Threats to female health were consequently numerous, as were the sorts of “illnesses” many women were treated for. The attempt to fit the female body to the male standard of beauty, for example, often resulted in eating disorders such as anorexia.. These women refused to eat in order to appear “feminine”. They perceived themselves as nothing but frail ornaments for their husbands to show off.

⁷³ Gilman. p. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p.11.

They were used to and unknowingly fostered the idea of the passive housewife, lacking any personality or emotion. Another common “malady” which women were treated for was nymphomania, which particularly revealed the widespread fear of aggressive, self-determined women. Those who exercised sexual emotions were deemed insane as they rejected the feminine ideal of passivity. Such women were forced into asylums and received questionable treatments. As husbands were legally authorized to decide over their wives, many women were sent to asylums and treated against their will. Others consciously used the “illness” to get away from abusive marriages. Hysteria could therefore in some cases be considered an unconscious form of female protest, as hysterical behavior, both in women and men, is today sometimes recognized as a psychic form of conflict resolution. However, as the twentieth century commenced, the diagnosis hysterical neurosis continuously lost influence.

Chapter Two

1950s' Society and Psychiatry in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

Fundamental Changes for Women –

The First Half of the Twentieth Century

The beginning of the twentieth century entailed numerous changes for American women. Their position in society was gradually but substantially transformed. These changes were closely tied to alterations in society in general, such as industrialization, population growth, and dramatic global events such as the two world wars. More and more women began to work outside the home, and the number of women engaged in political activities also grew. One of the most significant events was the introduction of a general right for women to vote, introduced in 1919 via the 19th Amendment.

Domestic life changed considerably for white, middle class women in the 1950s. Mass production of standardized products grew rapidly, and many of the products were laborsaving devices specifically designed for the homemaker.⁷⁵ Since these products were mainly aimed at housewives, women gained a significant amount of influence as consumers. As a result of the effectiveness of the new products, women had a lot more time on their hands. Ironically, the time women gained due to timesaving new inventions for the home was primarily used to increase the compulsiveness of the female homemaker. With all the new technical devices at hand she could invest additional time and effort in perfecting her own appearance and that of her home, husband and kids.

⁷⁵ Dingwall, Eric John. *The American Woman. A Historical Study*. New York: Octagon Books, 1976. P.130.

While an increasing number of women had attended colleges and universities in the 1920s and 30s, there was a noticeable drop in the enrolment of women in higher education during the 1950s, as women turned back to the domestic sphere.

According to Elaine Showalter, women in the post war era had benefited from the social disturbance of the war. The common perception of women as fragile and at risk for nervous disorders had been substantially modified. As a consequence, the diagnosis “hysteria” was subject to a dramatic decline in the post war decades. Women were considered more robust and less susceptible to mental breakdowns, as women had proven themselves in filling the workplaces of men drafted by the army. Another aspect was that the field of psychiatry increasingly included women as professionals. This led to an increased awareness of female concerns, and to increasingly female points of view in the evaluation of female mental illness. The increasing numbers of women working as psychiatrists or medical assistants contributed to a gradual transformation of the traditionally male dominated field of psychiatry.⁷⁶

Ideas about women’s mental health began to change for other reasons as well. In the 1920s and 30s, Sigmund Freud formulated his views on female psychology in several essays, including his theory of the so-called Oedipus complex.⁷⁷ Freud’s assumptions were highly influential at the time and triggered heated debates on issues such as female sexuality and the psychology of women. However, in the 1950s, Freudian ideas began to rapidly lose ground. Rather than being diagnosed in Freudian term, patients were now diagnosed with and treated for newly recognized illnesses such as schizophrenia, manic-depression, autism, depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder. The number of patients confined to public mental health institutions peaked in 1955. These developments could also be noticed in the literature of the time. It was a time of demand for conformity and a

⁷⁶ Showalter. pp. 195-196.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 199.

time when the number of psychological patients skyrocketed. Therefore, it is not surprising that female writers were increasingly receiving psychological treatments.

In Her Own Voice: Literature by Women in the 1950s

The literature of the second part of the twentieth century is commonly referred to as post-modern literature. It is characterized by rapid cultural, political and social changes.

Compared to the decades of the first part of the century, the literature of the second part is characterized by more emphasis on the individual. In post-modern literature, the lack of trusted value and identity patterns is a leading motif. While society of the fifties is characterized by a more or less subtle pressure to conform, the corresponding literature focuses more on the individual and the reflection of his or her personal relation to the collective. The examination of one's personal life is the main centre of attention for many poets of the time, and they are referred to as "confessional poets".⁷⁸ Sylvia Plath belongs to this group of confessional poets. While she was primarily as poet, the piece of work she is best-known for is a novel. *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, but is set in the 1950s. The novel is often referred to as an autobiographic piece of work, reflecting the author's own transition from childhood to adulthood. Akin to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath struggled with mental illness and both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Bell Jar* can to a certain extent be considered autobiographical accounts of these struggles. In this chapter, I will explore the social pressure on women in this age of conformity, and show how the novel relates female madness to social structures of the time.

⁷⁸ Zapf. p. 313.

The 1950s in *The Bell Jar*

Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood

Roughly seventy years after “The Yellow Wallpaper” was published, Sylvia Plath wrote *The Bell Jar*. Yet again, the novel is the story of a young woman struggling with her mental health. As such, it is a complex account of schizophrenic psychosis in a young woman. *The Bell Jar* tells the story of a girl’s coming-of-age, but it does not follow the usual trajectory of the Bildungsroman. The protagonist is nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood. Instead of passing the usual developmental milestones leading to adulthood, young Esther regresses into madness. Being a student at renowned Smith College, she wins an internship at a fashion magazine in New York on account of her academic excellence. Since Esther’s ambition is to become a writer, she welcomes this opportunity at first, but soon after returning home to her mother, she finds herself in a severe depression. She experiences a nervous breakdown. Life in a big city like New York, together with her incipient depression, challenge Esther’s relationship with the seemingly respectable medical student Buddy Willard. Having received a rejection form Harvard aggravates her situation even more. Despite treatment for her condition she hardly improves. During the peak of her depression, Esther tries to commit suicide with sleeping pills. After several treatment attempts, she finally recovers and eventually manages to return to school.

In contrast to “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the protagonist in the *The Bell Jar* is neither married, nor a young mother. Still, Esther feels social pressure to adapt to societal rules. She senses this pressure not only from her mother or from society in general, but also from her fiancé. Experiences, which normally might be life-changing in a positive sense, such as living in New York City, receiving a first marriage proposal, having success in college, are upsetting and disorienting to her. Instead of setting meaningful

goals for herself while rejecting those dictated by society, Esther develops a depression and wants to die. At the end of the novel she slowly recovers from her suicide attempt: her hope is simply to survive.

Similar to “The Yellow Wallpaper”, *The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical account of the author’s own mental breakdown and suicide attempt. As such, *The Bell Jar* can be considered not only a confessional novel but also a statement of what happens to a woman’s hopes and ambitions in a society that has no interest in taking female ideas and aspirations seriously. “[...] Madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state”⁷⁹, Phyllis Chesler claims in her book *Women and Madness*. In contrast to Sylvia Plath, Esther Greenwood’s artistic aspirations remain unrecognized. Nevertheless, Plath had to deal with being in the shadow of her husband’s literary success, and she was left to taking care of the home and the children while her husband was free to write. While in search of her identity, Esther is confronted with a frightening descent toward madness. She feels increasingly alienated from the cultural demands of society in the 1950s. She refuses to identify herself with the image of women that is perpetuated daily around her. Plath creates and uses her protagonist to guide the reader through the world of psychiatric treatment of the 1950s. In doing so, the novel addresses themes such as societal pressure, female sexuality and confinement.

Following the dramatic experience of the Great Depression, two world wars, and the dreadful event of the first atomic bomb explosion, Americans were essentially tired of war and conflict. As the 1950s began, the longing for peace and harmony increased, both within the private home and within the public sphere. The general attitude was to avoid conflict at all means, rendering the decade into what today is known as the age of

⁷⁹ Chesler. p. 76.

conformity, as the general attitude was to avoid conflict at all means. It also entailed a revival of the Victorian concept of separate spheres. The 1950s turned into a veritable celebration of the “feminine” ideal, stressing the differences rather than the common ground between males and females. Private and public attention turned to the home front, and family life, as well as domestic politics, was the main matter of interest. Amongst other things, this change was clearly visible in popular culture and reflected in Hollywood movies. Most of these movies were set in the family environment and praised “a feminine ideal based in domesticity”⁸⁰. Politically, the phenomenon of McCarthyism reflected the pressure to conform to and display total loyalty to the nation. The newly emerged Cold War was a great political concern. Every citizen of the United States was expected to conform to cold war policies, and there was little tolerance for different views.

Sylvia Plath clearly embeds the story of Esther Greenwood into the political situation of the time. *The Bell Jar* introduces its setting by referring to the execution of the Rosenbergs. In the summer of 1953 Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were accused of and electrocuted for espionage. It was believed that they had passed secret US military information on nuclear weapons on to Soviet Intelligence. The fear of the so-called “red scare” was omnipresent, and it was believed that more and more people sympathetic with Russia and the communist regime would infiltrate American labor unions and government agencies.⁸¹ As such, the novel is not only placed temporally, but also regarding the contents of McCarthyism, the fear of communism, and the demand for conformity. One of the most severe infringements on civil rights at that time was the lack of privacy. People were watching each other, making sure the neighbors were leading the

⁸⁰ Norton, Mary Beth. “Women and the Feminine Ideal in Postwar America”. *Major Problems in American Women’s History*. Eds. Norton, Mary Beth. Ruth M. Alexander. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. p. 394.

⁸¹ Chafe, William H. *A History of Our Time*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003. p. 42.

kind of lives they were expected to. People with different views or lifestyles were often confronted with suspicion and hostility by their fellow citizens. While Plath consciously chose to include these political aspects of the 1950s into the novel, the social historical aspects in the text are enlightening as well.

Betty Friedan and the “feminine mystique”

American feminist and writer Betty Friedan examined American women and their role in society in the 1950s United States in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan explores why and how the lifestyles and positions of women in the mid-century society differed so much from those of previous decades. Her bestseller was published the same year as *The Bell Jar*, in 1963. The book portrays American women and their lifestyles in the 1950s and therefore provides a fruitful overview of women’s social history in that decade.

Friedan coined the term “feminine mystique”, which was, as she explains, a reference to an ideology aimed at keeping women in their role as wives and mothers inside the home. The proponents of this ideology claimed that the confinement of women to the home was their “proper” role on account of religious or biological reasons. Little girls were raised to believe that the main focus of attention in their lives should be to find a husband in order to have children. Women would find personal happiness, it was claimed, by means of dedicating their time and energy to husband, offspring and the home. Akin to Jennie, the sister-in-law representing the ideal Victorian woman in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Buddy Willard’s mother, the potential mother-in-law, represents the prototypical female ideal of the 1950s. Friedan argues that this concept had been created and sustained in order to achieve certain goals of a patriarchic society, which held that women would “find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal

love”⁸². However, the reality was that many women were discontent precisely because of this repressive confinement to separate spheres. According to Friedan, both “women and men found personal identity and fulfillment through individual achievement, most notably through careers”.⁸³ The fact that many women themselves believed in the God-given gender roles, however, made it even harder for these women to identify the real source of their dissatisfaction, leading in some cases to psychological struggles and overt disease. This implicit failure to recognize the true nature of one’s discontent was what Friedan calls the “feminine mystique”.

Friedan blamed the media for promoting and upholding the gender roles, and therefore contributing to the “feminine mystique”. Much like the Ladies’ Magazines of the late nineteenth century, women’s magazines of the 1950s greatly influenced and perpetuated gender perceptions. The magazines and kinds of images used in advertisements openly promoted the ideal of the perfect housewife and stay-at-home mother who would find her fulfillment in taking care of husband and children. The popular magazines offered advice on all issues considered important in a woman’s life. Women were told how to dress, act, and talk in order to “catch” a husband. Women were advised on issues such as pregnancy and child rearing; they learned what to do to keep their husbands satisfied and their homes neat and clean. Interior design for kitchens became very popular again, as women were once more spending most of their time there. Other than working in the kitchen, women would sew, grocery shop and chauffeur their children to various activities.⁸⁴

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is initially looking forward to going to New York as an intern at a fashion magazine. While she is excited about the position and enjoys shopping

⁸² Meyerowitz, Joanne. “Competing Images of Women in Post-war Mass Culture”. *Major Problems in American Women’s History*. Eds. Norton, Mary Beth. Ruth M. Alexander. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. p. 408

⁸³ Norton. “Women and the Feminine Ideal in Post-war America”. p. 394

⁸⁴ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. p. 2.

in New York, the world she is confronted with at the magazine increasingly alienates her. Along with the other twelve girls who are also working for the magazine, Esther is being showered with bonuses and free gifts. These consist mainly of typical feminine activities such as hairstyling, passes to fashion shows and “advice about what to do with our particular complexions”⁸⁵. In almost the same manner as the protagonist of her novel, Sylvia Plath herself was a guest editor at a young women’s magazine. During her internship, Plath was “[...] bombarded with the seductions of the feminine mystique: the latest fashions, cosmetics, and techniques of man hunting. Under the bright light of fashionable women’s culture her intellectual and artistic goals seemed flimsy.”⁸⁶ The ideas promoted by the magazine and the kind of gifts the girls received in *The Bell Jar* unconsciously alienated Esther, as they promoted the typical 1950s lifestyle. Esther, however, has intellectual ambitions and cannot identify herself with the other girls or the female gender roles promoted.

“The problem that has no name”

What Friedan then calls the problem that has no name, is mentioned by Plath as early as on page two. Esther “knows” that there is something wrong with her, but she cannot grasp what it is. As explained by Friedan, the sense of discontent and dissatisfaction with their lives confused many women who seemed to have everything a woman could desire. “I was supposed to be having the time of my life,”⁸⁷ Esther thinks. “I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes I’d bought at Bloomingdale’s one lunch hour with a black leather belt and black patent

⁸⁵ Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. p. 3.

⁸⁶ Ryan, Mary P. *Womanhood in America. From Colonial Times to the Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. p. 358.

⁸⁷ Plath. p. 2.

leather pocket-book to match.”⁸⁸ Esther feels that she is discontent with her life, but she cannot grasp the true source of her discontent. She ought to feel happy, since society provides her with what every girl dreams of: make-overs and nice shoes. Instead, Esther begins to slide into a depression, which is “the problem that has no name”. She knows that the world of fashion in New York should make her feel glamorous and happy. Instead, she sees only the dark side of life in an outwardly glamorous city that is filled with hypocrisy, drunkenness and violence. The prospects of getting married and having children seem to frighten her even more, to an extent that she feels trapped. Esther senses that there is something “wrong” about her reactions, but she grows increasingly isolated as she thinks that she is the only person who experiences these doubts, aversions and such a strong sense of dissatisfaction. Eventually she begins to sense a loss of reality. This sense grows until it becomes unbearable for her, leading to her attempted suicide.

Burdened with Virginity: Esther’s Sexuality

Many of Esther’s problems seem to derive from the conflicting views on sexuality she is confronted with. The contradictions are especially obvious in relation to Buddy Willard. He expects her to be a virgin, while he admits to having had premarital sex with another woman. At the same time, Esther’s mother and grandmother had cautioned her against having premarital sex, for her future husband’s sake. “All I’d heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for. So I didn’t really see the harm in anything Buddy would think up to do.”⁸⁹ After his confession, Esther instantly decides she does not want to marry Buddy: “What I couldn’t stand was Buddy pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time

⁸⁸ Plath, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 64.

he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face."⁹⁰ While Esther thinks Buddy's views are hypocritical, his conflicting attitudes result in her being preoccupied with her virginity. It is a real burden to her. She feels like she is carrying around something that is making her life harder and more complicated. In simply disengaging herself from the "burden" of her virginity she hopes for relief.

However, throughout the novel, sexuality is closely linked to violence and cruelty. Esther is almost raped by Marco, and after losing her virginity to Irwin, she bleeds so badly that she has to go to the emergency room. "You are one in a million"⁹¹, the emergency ward doctor tells her, referring to the rarity of such strong bleeding. The entire experience is horrifying and painful for Esther. "But all I felt was a sharp, startlingly bad pain. 'It hurts,' I said. 'Is it supposed to hurt?'"⁹² Still, she feels relieved when it is over. She has finally gotten rid of the burden, and she feels as if she has earned a bit more freedom. In an obsessive attempt, she got herself liberated from a virginity she finds oppressive, by a masculinity she finds hideous. However, coming to this realization has been a strenuous process for the Esther. Since 1950s society did not provide lifestyle alternatives to the ideologically branded attitudes towards female sexuality of the time, it is not surprising that many girls and young woman were experiencing "the problem that has no name", meaning that they were feeling discontent and unhappy without knowing why.

Motherhood and Daughterhood

The obvious backlash in terms of female self-determination can be linked to another phenomenon of the 1950s: The birthrate in the United States increased suddenly and

⁹⁰ Plath, p. 67.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 223.

⁹² Ibid. p. 218.

rapidly. From 1946 until 1964, birth rates were higher than ever.⁹³ Large campaigns against the use of contraceptives were launched, as well as against abortion. While contraceptives were officially illegal, they were still available. The progressive movement in favor of birth control, called Planned Parenthood, lost much of its influence in the fifties. The decade became known for the so-called Baby Boom, as birth rates skyrocketed. “Statisticians were especially astounded at the fantastic increase in the number of babies among college women”, Betty Friedan writes. “Where once they had two children, now they had four, five, six. Women who had once wanted careers were now making careers out of having babies.”⁹⁴ Within the male-dominated concept of separate spheres, women gained most recognition by conforming to the concept, which implied having the neatest house and the most babies. The more a woman dedicated herself to bearing and bringing up children, the more respect society granted her.

In *The Bell Jar*, the theme motherhood is more relevant within the context of the protagonist’s relationship to her mother than within the context of her own experience of being a mother. Even though *The Bell Jar* is written in the first person, the reader knows little about the protagonist’s situation. The narrator’s descriptions focus on her condition at the time, and the reader learns little about her life afterwards. One page three, there is a subtle hint at the protagonist’s motherhood. Looking back on her depression, Esther says that she still owns some of the gifts, which she received during her internship at the magazine. “I use the lipstick now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses for the baby to play with.”⁹⁵ This en passant referral to motherhood can be interpreted more as a sign that the protagonist has moved on after her illness rather than a genuine clue to motherhood. During her illness and recovery, Esther all but despises

⁹³ Norton, Mary Beth. *A People and A Nation. A History of the United States*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, p. 788.

⁹⁴ Friedan. p. 6.

⁹⁵ Plath. p. 3.

babies. She associates motherhood with being imprisoned. “What I hate is the thought of being under a man’s thumb”, Esther tells Dr. Nolan. ““A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.’ ‘Would you act differently if you didn’t have to worry about a baby?’ ‘Yes,’”⁹⁶ is Esther’s answer and she also thinks to herself that “if [she] had to wait on a baby all day, [she] would go mad.”⁹⁷ The whole subject of motherhood appears rather negative in Esther’s eyes. Her neighbor, Dodo Conway, fascinates Esther in a grotesque way. Conway is the mother of six children whom she feeds with “rice crispies, peanut-butter-and-marshmallow sandwiches, vanilla ice cream and gallon upon gallon of Hoods milk”⁹⁸. When watching her neighbor with the children from the window, Esther thinks to herself: “Children made me sick.”⁹⁹

The relationship between Esther and her mother is one of the main relationships in the text, and the theme of motherhood is significant in that sense. Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother. She also wishes that Jay Cee was her mother. Her relationship to Dr. Nolan is close and warm. When she is embraced by her trusted doctor, Esther feels hugged by her “like a mother”.¹⁰⁰ Pat McPherson, author of the book *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*, calls Esther’s hatred towards her mother “matrophobia”. Rather than blaming the mother for the relationship being so dysfunctional, McPherson looks for other causes. She explains: “Encountering the fear of becoming one’s mother is the central experience of female adolescence [...] and denying – while projecting – the fear and hatred of mothers is the central experience of the American middle class in the 1950s.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, according to McPherson, it is more Esther’s fear than Mrs.

⁹⁶ Plath. p. 212.

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 213.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 112.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 113.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 203.

¹⁰¹ McPherson, Pat. *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991. p. 59.

Greenwood's failures as a mother that cause the conflict between mother and daughter. I do not agree entirely with McPherson, as I think that Mrs. Greenwood does make significant mistakes that contribute to the defectiveness of the mother-daughter relationship. Mrs. Greenwood obviously has no understanding of the psychological problems of her daughter. In a sense, she can be considered a victim of the ideologies of her time, as the public acceptance of mental illness and psychiatry were still very low. Mrs. Greenwood betrays her daughter by not being able to accept her illness. When Esther refuses further treatment after the first session of shock therapy, her mother interprets this as a sign of improvement:

“‘I knew my baby wasn't like that.’

I looked at her. ‘Like what?’

‘Like those awful dead people at the hospital.’ She paused. ‘I knew you’d decide to be all right again.’”¹⁰²

“Kitchen-mat” Wifhood – Marriage in *The Bell Jar*

Significant changes concerning the position of women had taken place between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1950s, many of them triggered by the necessities of the Second World War. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, a considerable proportion of the male American work force was drafted into the army. More and more women were recruited to replace the missing males in the work force. When the war ended and the men returned, they claimed their jobs back. Women were pushed out of the employment sector back into the home. Many women fought to keep their jobs, and while not all were successful, a significant number of women remained in the work force. However, as social problems of the postwar society became more and more visible, working women

¹⁰² Plath. p. 140.

were to a large extent blamed for causing these problems by leaving their “proper place”, the home. This resulted in a new and firm conviction that women should be primarily committed to motherhood and marriage, and that their workplace should be the home.¹⁰³ “[... Y]oung women of the postwar era seemed more firmly committed to marriage and family”, Carol Ruth Berkin writes in her essay “Not Separate, not Equal”. “[W]hite middle-class girls [of the 1950s] were marrying younger than their grandmothers had done: feminism as a conscious ideology was moribund.”¹⁰⁴ By the end of the decade, the average age for a young woman to get married had dropped down to age 20, and it continued to drop.¹⁰⁵ “Many girls’ only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands”¹⁰⁶. Therefore, from a 1950s point-of-view, Esther finds herself in an enormously desirable situation for a young woman at the time. She is in a steady relationship with a serious young medical student. Everything suggests that Buddy Willard wants to get married and start a family with her. Still, this perception seems to disturb Esther rather than reassure her. She senses that the prospect of married life with a man like Willard does not correspond to the kind of life she hopes for. Neither marriage nor motherhood seem desirable to Esther: “... I knew that in spite of all the roses and the kisses . . . what [a man] secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for [the wife] to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat”¹⁰⁷, she claims at one point. When confronted with her neighbor, who is pregnant with her seventh child, her reaction is disgust: “Children made me sick. . . . I couldn't see the point of getting

¹⁰³ Berkin, Carol Ruth. “Not separate, not equal” *Women of America. A History*. Eds. Berkin, Carol Ruth. Mary Beth Norton. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin College Div, 1979. p. 280.

¹⁰⁴ Berkin. “Not separate, not equal”. p. 280.

¹⁰⁵ Friedan. p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ Plath. p. 80.

up. I had nothing to look forward to.”¹⁰⁸ Esther also “[thinks] that maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.”¹⁰⁹ She clearly rates marriage and motherhood not a desirable option for herself. At the same time she feels left with no alternatives, causing her desperate situation. Realizing that the lifestyles society had to offer would not make them content, may be seen as one of the reasons contributing to many young women hitting rock bottom.

During her internship at the women’s magazine, Esther feels a sense of alienation from the other girls who have also won scholarships. She describes them as

mostly girls my age with wealthy parents [...]. They were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.¹¹⁰

This passage shows that Esther sees herself as an outside observer compared to the other girls. It also implies that what she hopes for and expects from life is quite different. She is not dreaming of finding a husband and starting a family as her main goal in life. While Esther is quite certain of what she does not want for herself, she is somehow lost when it comes to what she actually hopes for. Esther obviously feels a lack of control over her life, as well as restricted possibilities for her to choose from:

A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can’t afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car. Only I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped

¹⁰⁸ Plath. p. 132.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 81.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 4.

from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back
to work like a numb trolley-bus.¹¹¹

Esther feels pulled between her desire to write and the pressure she feels to settle down and start a family. While Esther's intellectual talents earn her prizes, scholarships, and respect, many people assume that she must want to become a wife and mother. However, Esther is convinced that marriage would mean having to give up her writing. Buddy adds to this fear by telling her that once she is married, she will have her hands so full with her children that she will not even be thinking about writing poems. The girls at her college mock her commitment to study and write. They only show respect when she begins dating the handsome and popular Buddy Willard. Her relationship with Buddy also earns her mother's unlimited approval, and everyone expects Esther to marry him. As Buddy assumes that Esther will drop her poetic ambitions as soon as she becomes a mother, Esther also assumes that she cannot be both mother and poet. Seventy years earlier, combining artistic ambitions with marriage had not been possible for the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" either. While being able to express herself through writing seems to be utterly important to her, the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" has to hide this from her husband and sister-in-law, who would consider this a harmful activity. The restriction to pursuing their artistic aspirations is psychologically damaging for the women in both texts.

Shifts in Education

Together with the sociologist Ferdinand Lundberg, American psychiatrist and anti-feminist Marynia F. Farnham wrote the book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which was published in 1947. In the book, Farnham referred to women who attempted to compete

¹¹¹ Plath. p. 5.

with men as “neurotic” and “unfeminine”¹¹². This reflects the general attitude in American society at the time. While women had been working towards more equal treatment and opportunity in the decades prior to the 1950s, the biological as well as social differences between the sexes and their differing roles in society were emphasized during the fifties. Fewer and fewer women were attending college, and many of those that were discontinued their education as soon as they got married. “A century earlier”, Betty Friedan claims “women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband”.¹¹³ For the work sector, this again meant, similar to the Victorian age in the mid and late nineteenth century, a separation of the male and the female spheres. A woman’s place was in the home while a man’s place was to ensure a family’s financial living by working outside the home. Farnham criticized the fact that women were given the opportunity to get a college education. Her claim was that girls receiving the same education as boys would lead to women being uncertain about their place in society. The newly gained freedoms, such as being allowed to attend university, having access to contraceptives, and being able to file for divorce, had created severe problems for women, Farnham claimed. According to her, rather than improving a woman’s life, these new attitudes and possibilities would render a woman’s life more complicated. A serious personal crisis could be the result of the lack of a feminine identity.¹¹⁴ Also, women attempting to combine family duties with a professional career would be very likely to neglect one or the other. Most often, the home would be the first to be neglected.

While Esther is allowed to go to college and get an education in *The Bell Jar*, this is seen as a way to spend her time before marriage, while waiting for her potential husband to finish his education, rather than to provide her with an education she could

¹¹² Norton, Mary Beth. “Women and the Feminine Ideal in Postwar America”. p. 394.

¹¹³ Friedan. p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Farnham, Marynia F. “Modern Woman: The Lost Sex”. *Major Problems in American Women’s History*. Eds. Norton, Mary Beth. Ruth M. Alexander. Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. p. 395.

make a living with. Both her mother and Buddy Willard do not even consider the option that she might wish to do something else other than becoming a housewife. Esther consciously distances herself from the corresponding “educational attempts” of her mother and grandmother:

My grandmother and mother were such good cooks that I left everything to them. They were always trying to teach me one dish or another, but I would just look on and say, ‘Yes, yes, I see,’ while the instructions slid through my head like water, and then I’d always spoil what I did so no one would ask me to do it again.¹¹⁵

However, Esther also distances herself from her boss Jay Cees’s advice: “Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn’t think they had anything to teach me.”¹¹⁶ Even though she looks up to Jay Cee, Esther also realizes that Jay Cee is part of the same generation as her mother and grandmother, and shares many of the same convictions. Rejecting advice and help from her mother and other older women around her is in a sense making Esther’s life harder, like Farnham claims. However, Esther’s inability to adapt is representative for the discontent of many young women in a society that restricted them from living their lives as they wished. Farnham also completely ignores the fact that an intelligent young woman might feel frustrated and discontent if not allowed to get an education and make use of her intellect, and the consequences this might have.

Esther’s Diagnosis and the Electronic Shock Treatment

Esther Greenwood’s condition indicates that she is struggling with a form of schizophrenia. According to the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing, who

¹¹⁵ Plath. p. 112.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 6.

researched and wrote on mental illness and particularly the experience of psychosis in the 1950s and 60s, the main traits of the schizophrenic illness are the dividedness of the personal self, as well as the distinct sense of isolation:

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relationship with his world and, in the second part, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself with 'others' or 'at home' in the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation [...]¹¹⁷

This definition of schizophrenia seems to be in accordance with what Esther Greenwood is experiencing. She obviously feels isolated from the world around her, her mother, the other girls in New York and also her fellow patients. She does not identify herself with the society she lives in, and she compares this feeling of isolation to living under a bell jar. She can see and hear the world around her, but only through a glass wall and she is not a part of it. She is an outside observer and at the same time she is subject to observation by others. As she is trapped underneath the bell jar, she cannot escape the glances and judgment of others. However, Laing factors out any kind of organic reasons in schizophrenia. The question one might ask at this point is whether all the emotions and perceived negative circumstances Esther has to deal with are enough to explain her desire to take her own life. It is more likely, as generally accepted by the medical community today that an organic cause, in combination with external factors, can be blamed for the Esther's suicide attempt.

The treatment proposed to Esther by Dr. Gordon is electroshock treatment.

Psychiatry's electroconvulsive shock treatment, EST or ECT, consists of electricity being passed through the brain with a force ranging from 70 to 400 volts. The treatment was

¹¹⁷ Laing, D. R. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London: Penguin Books, 1990. p. 17

introduced in 1938 by Ugo Cerletti and Lucino Bini when it was applied it for the first time to schizophrenic patients. The intention of the treatment was, according to the narrator in *The Bell Jar*, to “clear one’s mind”¹¹⁸. The rationale for the treatment was the discovery that epilepsy and schizophrenia seemed to have opposite effects on the brain. It was assumed that by provoking an epileptic seizure the effects of schizophrenia on the brain would be reduced. Providing controlled electric shocks to the brain could evoke seizures. The electric shocks were administered for as little as a fraction of a second to as long as several seconds. Electrodes were placed on each side of the head in the region of both temples. Alternatively, they could be placed on the front and back of one side of the skull such that the electricity passed through just the left or right side of the brain.¹¹⁹ It is thought that ECT works by causing a brief period of irregular brain activity, manifesting a seizure. Seizure release many chemicals in the brain. These agents, called neurotransmitters, deliver messages from one brain cell to another. The release of these chemicals makes the brain cells work better. An improvement in the treated person’s mood can be observed when his or her brain cells and chemical messengers worked better. An article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* states that “Electroconvulsive therapy is widely used to treat certain psychiatric disorders, particularly major depression. [...] Modifications of the technique [have been introduced since the 1970s] to minimize cognitive side effects while maintaining efficacy [...]”¹²⁰

The Bell Jar describes Esther Greenwood’s electroshock therapy during her stay in the sanatorium:

Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite.

¹¹⁸ Plath. p. 153.

¹¹⁹ Ussher. p. 107.

¹²⁰ Sackeim, Harold A. “Effects of Stimulus Intensity and Electrode Placement on the Efficacy and Cognitive Effects of Electroconvulsive Therapy”. *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Vol. 12. 25 March 1993. p. 839.

I shut my eyes.

There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me until I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.

I wondered what a terrible thing it was that I had done.¹²¹

The session is described as an extremely traumatic and frightening experience for Esther. She perceives it as punishment for her failure to adapt rather than a serious attempt to help her get better. Jane Ussher, a professor of women's health psychology and author of *Women's Madness*, calls the treatments many mentally ill women were ordered to undergo in the 1950s "invasive 'care'", as they were often applied by a male doctor without the consent of the patient, who was in most cases a woman. This was done in a similar manner as the treatment the protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper": a combination of male power and dominance over women in private as well as professional contexts, and the simple disregard for female ability to judge and self-assess. Ussher, who is critical of the ETC treatment and sets it on a par with the rest cure treatment of hysteria in Victorian times, claims that both treatments aim at "reducing women to a childlike dependent state, literally confining her to her bed, to her home or to the hospital [...]"¹²². I do see significant differences between the treatments, which are not least visible in the different endings of the two texts describing the treatments. While the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is literally driven to insanity by severe mistreatment, Esther Greenwood is slowly but surely recovering at the end of *The Bell Jar*. While the two protagonists feel similarly trampled over by their treatments, the results of the treatments are almost opposite. Esther has to undergo a long process of finding the right approach to treatment, but in the end it is the electroshock treatment that

¹²¹ Plath. p. 138

¹²² Ussher. P. 156.

helps her, even though it not until it is prescribed by a trusted female doctor that it shows positive effects.

Esther's electroshock treatment is already foreshadowed on the first page of the novel, when the protagonist discusses the execution of the Rosenbergs by means of the electric chair. On the first page of *The Bell Jar*, Esther claims that "the idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers. [...] It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burnt alive all along your nerves"¹²³ Ironically, she has to experience a similar intrusion, which she can hardly stand hearing about in the beginning of the novel. This is another indication that in Esther's eyes, the treatment appears more as a punishment than a sincere attempt to help her.

According to Elaine Showalter, the shock treatments serve as metaphors for the social control of women.¹²⁴ There is an apparent analogy between the electroshock treatment Esther had to undergo and her first sexual experiences. Both are controlled by men to an extent that she feels defenceless, and both experiences are repulsive and painful. After her first session of electroshock treatment with Dr. Nolan, Esther feels "surprisingly at peace"¹²⁵. To Esther, madness had been the drop of an airless bell jar over her head. During her depression, she perceives being locked in: "wherever I sat...I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my sour air."¹²⁶ And she adds, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream."¹²⁷ Which is not to say that Esther believes the world outside the sanatorium is full of people living an authentic existence. She asks, "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the

¹²³ Plath. p. 1

¹²⁴ Showalter. p. 213.

¹²⁵ Plath. p. 206.

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 178.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 178.

college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort.”¹²⁸

However, after her treatment session with Dr. Nolan, when Esther has overcome her fear of her first traumatic electroshock session, she feels the bell jar has lifted and let in some air: “The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air.”¹²⁹ While it is no longer surrounding her, the bell jar is still above Esther’s head. She is on her way to recovery, but she has not entirely recovered yet.

The treatment has helped Esther cope with her mental problems, but she is still left to figure out what kind of life she want to live, given the society she lives in. Rather than being an extreme case of dissatisfaction with her living circumstances, Esther Greenwood’s emotional journey is representative of what many women at the time went through. Eventually, “the problem that has no name” became so pressing that change in society was inevitable. Coined by this spirit, the successive sixties and seventies were characterized by crucial social alterations in regards to women’s roles and standing.

¹²⁸ Plath. p. 227.

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 206.

Chapter Three

Madness as a metaphor in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

The Women's Movement and Canadian Literature in the 1970s

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, a Canadian novel, was published in 1972, roughly ten years after Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. However, the novels are set about twenty years apart. In those twenty years, North American society had been undergoing tremendous changes. Numerous changes can be observed when comparing *Surfacing* to *The Bell Jar*. At the same time, many of the problems that Esther Greenwood saw herself confronted with in the 1950s, the protagonist of *Surfacing* has to deal with as well.

The Women's Movement

The Women's Movement can be characterized as an attempt to improve the living conditions and status of women in the patriarchal society of the 1970s. Historically, the so-called Women's Liberation Movement in the United States began in 1848, when feminist activists such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the "Women's Convention" in Seneca Falls. Major issues discussed at the convention concerned a woman's right to file for divorce and to own property, even after having married. The convention produced the "Declaration of Sentiments", which is considered the first step in the fight for women's suffrage and this was finally achieved when the Nineteenth Amendment became effective in 1920. However, after this milestone in the

Women's Movement was reached, "the first wave of feminist activity died down, though women moved into professional careers more easily than ever before."¹³⁰

In Canada, the struggle for women's suffrage began in the 1880s. It was spearheaded by immigrant women from Iceland, being accustomed to the right to vote in their home country. Nationwide voting rights were finally granted in 1925.

During World War II, many women stepped into formerly male dominated jobs in order to replace those who had been drafted into the army. This meant that women had many opportunities to work outside the home without major problems. When the soldiers returned home and forced the women back into the domestic sphere, they at first met little resistance as the country was recovering from the shock of the past war and the threat of a potential nuclear conflict. The newly coined term "togetherness" reflected the return to the traditional family concept with a housewife mother and breadwinning father discussed in the previous chapter. At the beginning of the 1960s, however, young North Americans were disillusioned by the spirit of conformity prevailing in the previous decade. As a consequence, the so-called counterculture formed. In contrast to the 1950s, the 60s and 70s were an eventful time. The previously generally accepted gender roles were starting to be questioned, and not only women but also men had to define their roles in society new. Atwood depicts this in her novel, the female struggle for self-discovery and how this new, female identity is not compatible with the male chauvinism of the past.

Betty Friedan's book *The Feminist Mystique*, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* were first attempts to end the prevailing complacency. As these books gained popularity, they initiated public discussions and what has been called

¹³⁰ Janeway, Elizabeth. *Between Myth and Morning. Women Awakening*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1974. p. 65.

“consciousness raising”.¹³¹ Friedan was one of the founders of NOW, the National Organization for Women, emerging in 1966. The organization’s purpose was to “to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.”¹³² NOW activists demanded and supported legal actions, which would result in equal employment opportunities, equal pay, and providing public childcare such that women would no longer be tied to the home.¹³³

The movement also raised a number of issues without immediate political questions relevance but of importance for the social role and self- perception of women. A woman’s relationship to her children and to her husband had to be reconsidered. Women began asking themselves whether taking care of home and children would be a woman’s main responsibility. “Is the woman to think of herself mainly as support to her husband? Is his vocation to come first in every case?”¹³⁴.

In line with these attitudinal changes in society, the education system underwent major changes in the 1960s and 1970s. Educational issues gained importance, and attempts were made to provide more equitable access to education, for example by establishing a network of community colleges throughout the country.¹³⁵ Still, yet in the early 1970s, when *Surfacing* was written, many Canadian women were trapped in lifestyles similar to women during the time that *The Bell Jar* is set. “As recently as the mid-1970s, the family pattern of young women still had a very traditional look”¹³⁶, states the homepage of the Canadian government.

In 1976, for example, the majority of women aged 20-24 were living with a spouse.

¹³¹ Janeway. p. 66.

¹³² Norton. “Women and the Feminine Ideal in Post-war America”. p. 397.

¹³³ Janeway. pp. 66-67.

¹³⁴ Ibid. p. 68.

¹³⁵ Wisenthal, M. “Statistics in Canada”. 11 August 2007. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/11-516-XIE/sectionw/sectionw.html>

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Indeed, almost all of these young women were married, whereas two and a half decades later, slightly over half of the young women in this age range were still living with their parents.¹³⁷

Almost 80 percent of all women in 1976 between the age of 25 and 29 were married, while almost 90 percent were either married or living with their family.¹³⁸ Once married, women were most likely to give up their employment outside the home to become housewives. While more than 60 percent of all women between the age of 20 and 24 were working outside the home in the mid seventies, only about 50 percent continued working after they had turned 25. Many of those who continued working did so part time in order to have enough time for their family duties.¹³⁹ In politics, women in the 1970s played “minor roles of secretaries and the non-speaking parts of loyal wives.”¹⁴⁰ Having a job outside the home did not free women from their domestic duties. Even if almost half of all women in North America worked outside the home, they were still entirely responsible for taking care of the home. Studies carried out in the 1970s show that women who were employed outside the home nevertheless spent an average of forty-two hours working within their home.¹⁴¹ These women could expect only little help from their husbands. These statistics show that women that despite of the feminist movement, Canadian women in the 1970s were actually leading quite similar lifestyles to women in the 1950s. While the protagonist of *Surfacing* seems to be in a essentially different life situation compared to Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, it can still be assumed that they were both confronted with numerous corresponding societal expectations concerning their education, marriage and motherhood.

¹³⁷ Wisenthal.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ryan. p. 365

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p .397

Defining Themselves: Canadian Women Writers in the 1970s

Canadian literature prior to the 1970s was often very closely tied to that of the United States. However, during the 70s Canadian literature began to establish itself in its own right. One of the central themes of the emerging Canadian literature was the country's relationship to the United States and Canada's position in the world in general, but also the difficult relationship between the English and the French speaking Canadians. As a result of growing self-awareness and self-esteem, the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s resulted in a large increase in French Canadian publications. Even though Margaret Atwood does not belong to the increasingly prominent group of French speaking Canadian authors, she turned into the best-known Canadian writer and literary critic of the 1970s. Atwood critic Margaret Laurence and Canadian author Alice Munro were other Canadian authors gaining international reputation. As pointed out by literary critic Coral Ann Howell, Canadian authors "write within the traditions they inherited but also write in resistance to those traditions, recognizing the need for their revision in order to redefine national and gender identity."¹⁴² Margaret Atwood's novels fit well into this definition of Howell. In the 1970s, Atwood published several novels and also other writings, such as the book *Survival: A thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* in 1972. Alongside feminism and women's roles in relation to men, nationalist and cultural concerns were Atwood's main fields of interest in the decade.

¹⁴² Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl. *Women's Movement. Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction*. Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000. p. 110.

Margaret Atwood and *Surfacing*

Surfacing, in line with the previous two texts, once again tells the story of female struggle for identity and self-acceptance. In *Surfacing*, a young, woman travels back to the Canadian wilderness where she grew up in a small cabin on an isolated island. The reason for her return is the somewhat mysterious disappearance of her father, a biologist, who had been living alone on the island since the death of his wife. Akin the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the protagonist and narrator of *Surfacing*, does not have a name, while all the other, even minor characters in the book, do. The namelessness of the protagonist, as discussed further down, can be interpreted in line of the general theme of the novel, which is a search for identity and the process of “surfacing”. While searching for clues for her father’s disappearance, the young divorcee is in the company of three friends, her lover Joe and the couple David and Anna, who are all three strangers to this part of the country, Northern Quebec. It soon becomes obvious that the young woman does not know any of them very well, and that the “friends” do not know anything about the protagonist’s life and the trauma of her past. This gap between the narrator and the other three figures becomes more and more evident during the course of the novel, as the individual characters emerge. Atwood critic Margaret Laurence writes in her review: “[The narrator] feels painfully separated in spirit from all these people, and her return to the cabin and the bush, the great good place of her earlier life, serves only to confirm and underline this sense of alienation, of living among strangers.”¹⁴³ Just like Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *Surfacing* feels different and isolated, and she becomes increasingly irritated with her companions’ behavior. As a kind of escape, she spiritually connects with her childhood, her upbringing and the island. She spends an increasing

¹⁴³ Laurence, Margaret. “Review on Surfacing” *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McCombs. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Company, 1988. p. 45.

amount of time strolling around the island by herself, looking for an Indian cave carving that she believes her father had discovered. She is convinced that her father intentionally left drawings and maps in the cabin as a hint or a present for her to find. While searching for clues, she emotionally reconnects with her childhood, which contributes to her feeling of isolation from her friends. Ultimately, the protagonist loses all contact with the other people. She feels alienated by them and what their lifestyles stand for. She hides in the forest, determined to stay on the island to raise the child she believes she is pregnant with. Whether or not she is actually pregnant is hard to tell, since the reader at this point realizes that the woman lives in a kind of parallel reality and is not a trustworthy source. In fact, the protagonist was never married, as she claims, and the marriage she has constructed in her head has been nothing but an affair with a married art professor. She did not lose a child either, but underwent an abortion, demanded by the child's father. As the protagonist tries to forget her painful past, her mind creates new realities to replace her haunted memories. In that sense, the novel explores the mind of a woman trying to cope with "the little brutalities inflicted on her body and spirit by the harsh politics of sex"¹⁴⁴. Throughout the novel, it is difficult for the reader to distinguish between actual reality and the protagonist's imagined version of reality.

At the time *Surfacing* was written, unlike the setting of *The Bell Jar*, the feminist revolution had already changed gender roles and the self-perception of women. Most literary studies of *Surfacing* focus on Canadian nationalism, Anti-Americanism, and the so-called "ecofeminist" aspects of the novel. It is a common approach to interpreting Atwood's work by exploring her depiction of a specific Canadian identity, and the relation to the United States. In the following section, however, I will look at *Surfacing* not primarily as a milestone of Canadian literature, and the frequently discussed theme of

¹⁴⁴ Woodcock, George. *Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing*. Toronto: ECW Press. 1990. p. 21.

Anti-Americanism, but rather explore its critique of gender roles in a patriarchal society and how this connects to female madness and the previously discussed texts. Rather than explore these issues further, I will focus on the text as a third prominent literary account of female insanity. The protagonist in *Surfacing* is clearly, like the two previous texts, another example of female oppression by men, as is the character Anna, who throughout the novel is constantly abused by her husband David. The protagonist goes through different stages of psychological struggles and, towards the end of the book, turns completely insane. However, similar to “The Yellow Wallpaper”, insanity appears as a triumphant escape from and defeat of male oppression.

When *Surfacing* was translated into German, the novel received the German title “Der lange Traum”¹⁴⁵, the long dream. The translation suggests that the entire and painful process of ‘surfacing’, of becoming aware of one’s own situation, seems like a long dream. In the end, the protagonist “wakes up” to understand and see her situation clearly, from her point of view. Objective reality was blurry to the protagonist, and she feels, like Esther Greenwood trapped under her bell jar, like she is in a dream. American poet and playwright Joan Larkin suggests that the “voyage of discovery of the protagonist in *Surfacing*, her madness, is much like the trip into inner space and time that R. D. Laing described in *The Politics of Experience* as a natural healing process”¹⁴⁶. In the end, the bell jar in the one novel has lifted and the dream in the other is over, and both protagonists feel liberated. Earlier authors have used similar metaphors to illustrate the process of female liberation, from either madness or male oppression. In Kate Chopin’s nineteenth century novel *The Awakening*, the protagonist in the end drowns herself as an act of ultimate liberation. The main concern for both the protagonist of *The*

¹⁴⁵ Vike, Berit. *Victimisation. Metaphors in Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing*. Thesis. University of Oslo, 2003. p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ Woodcock. p. 21.

Awakening and the protagonist of *Surfacing* is to achieve control over their own lives, which is not necessarily equal to being sane. While the process of surfacing is metaphorical for liberation in *Surfacing*, drowning has a similar significance in *The Awakening*. In both books, madness is equal to liberation. While *The Awakening* may not be considered a description of female madness, it is certainly a novel describing a woman's attempt to escape unhappiness imposed on her by a restricting society. The solution the protagonist finds for her situation is suicide, which is obviously closely linked to madness. When comparing *Surfacing* with "The Yellow Wallpaper", a similar solution can be found. Both the protagonist of the novel and the short story would be considered mad at the end of each text by an outside observer. However, rather than being a sign of defeat, their madness emerges as ultimate victory over the oppressive, masculine society of their time.

Anna, David, and Relations of Power

Throughout *Surfacing*, the theme of power and dominance appears in various contexts and in various guises. Central issues are human power over nature, and male power over women. The novel portrays suppressive power, sexual power and emotional power. One essential issue in the novel, the question of motherhood, was decided primarily by male power. According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, the execution of power is omnipresent in human society and renders individuals into what they are¹⁴⁷. For centuries, women were considered to be on the outside of male circles of power, along with "the mad, the poor, [...] and the workers"¹⁴⁸. A prominent example of such deep

¹⁴⁷ Foucault, Michel. *Power/ Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 - 1977*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980. p. 137.

¹⁴⁸ Beer, Gillian. „Representing Women, Re-presenting the Past“. *The Feminist Reader*. Besely, Katherine and Jane Moore (Eds.) London: Macmillan Education LTD, 1989. p. 71.

seated gender relations is the portrayal of the relationship between the protagonist and her former lover, the art professor:

The protagonist's relationship with her former lover reveals itself to be one such relationship reflecting the traditional pattern of heterosexual romance, in which the loving, admiring young woman lets herself be dominated by the 'powerful' male and his ideas about what a woman should and can be.¹⁴⁹

Another example is the relationship between David and Anna. David mentally abuses his wife. He humiliates her and constantly swears at her: "Up your ass"¹⁵⁰ he says when she points out a mistake to him. Similar to "The Yellow Wallpaper", *Surfacing* also portrays how male dominance is exerted by infantilization in a relationship. David feels superior to Anna, and he infantilizes her on many occasions: "Don't worry, baby, I know what I am doing."¹⁵¹ The psychological abuse Anna experiences from her husband peaks when he forces her to undress in front of everyone one afternoon, in order to have Joe film her for a movie project, he and David have been working on, claiming that they "need a naked lady"¹⁵². "'I wasn't bothering you,'" is her response to David's repeated demand for her to undress, and, "'Look, will you leave me alone?' [...] 'I'm minding my own business, mind yours why don't you.'"¹⁵³ Then Joe says that he does not want to film Anna if she does not want to be filmed. David reacts by claiming that she is just pretending not to want: "'It's token resistance', David said, 'she want to, she's an exhibitionist by heart. She likes her lush bod, don't you? Even if she is getting too fat.'"¹⁵⁴ Anna asks him to stop, saying that he is humiliating her, but David simply ignores her resistance: "'Now just takes it off like a good girl or I'll take it off for

¹⁴⁹ Özdemir, Erinc. *Power, Madness, and Gender Identity in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: A Feminist Reading*. Thesis. University of Bergen, 1993. p. 63.

¹⁵⁰ Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. London: Virago Press, 2004. p. 33.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p. 33.

¹⁵² Ibid. p. 128.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 128.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 129.

you.”¹⁵⁵ He makes it clear that in his eyes she is like a child whom he can tell what to do, even if it concerns her own body. “Sometimes I think he’d like me to die”¹⁵⁶, Anna says at one point in the novel. David considers her his property, and he wants her to be like a doll, pleasuring him sexually and always looking perfectly styled. Therefore, Anna panics when discovering that she will run out of make-up. She explains to the narrator that David will get furious if she does not wear make-up, because he wants her to look sexy and young at all times:

“‘God,’ she said, ‘what am I going to do? I forgot my make-up, he’ll kill me.’
I studied her: in the twilight her face was grey. ‘Maybe he won’t notice,’ I said.
‘He’ll notice, don’t you worry. Not now maybe, it hasn’t rubbed off, but in the morning. He wants me to look like a young chick all the time, if I don’t he gets mad.’”¹⁵⁷

This quote shows Atwood’s critique of objectification of women, as she clearly criticizes the social implications of make-up. The amount of pressure David puts on Anna to satisfy him visually and sexually, is enormous. He seems to believe that it is natural for a husband to demand this from his wife. By means of an almost tyrannical nature he bullies and intimidates Anna.

He’s got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I’m never sure. He’s crazy, there is something missing in him, you know what I mean? He likes to make me cry because he can’t do it himself.”¹⁵⁸

Similar to in *The Bell Jar*, male domination over women in *Surfacing* is closely linked to sexuality, violence and abuse. David sleeps with other women, against Anna’s will.

¹⁵⁵ Atwood. p. 129.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 117.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 116.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 116.

“Teasing, shit”, she tells the protagonist after David had made an approach at his wife’s friend. “He was doing it to me. He always does stuff like that to other women in front of me, he’d screw them with me in the room if he could. Instead he screws them somewhere else and tells me about it afterwards.”¹⁵⁹ David enjoys abusing his wife by telling her about his affairs, even though, or maybe precisely because he knows that she is offended. In the process of recovering from her painful past, witnessing the abusive relationship between David and Anna helps the protagonist realize the long-repressed facts about the abusive relationship she herself has been in. Initially she watches the two with astonishment and bewilderment, but increasingly realizes the abusive character of the male-female relationship that she previously has experienced herself. The main function of the David-Anna relationship is to help the protagonist realize her own situation, and the power relations between men and women in general in the 1970s. The realization, as well as the negative impacts of this realization, contributes greatly to the protagonist’s development towards madness. By observing the two, she increasingly not only realizes what she has been through with her former lover, but also how strongly the society she lives in is characterized by male domination in general. With David and Anna constantly displaying their dysfunctional relationship to her, it becomes increasingly difficult for the protagonist to repress her memory of her painful past and to uphold the fake memory of a past that has never happened. Hence, the married couple contributes greatly to the development of the protagonist’s psychosis.

Marriage and the Crisis of Motherhood

The protagonist’s madness presents itself on several levels. One of them is the narrator’s fabrication of her own past. The reader of *Surfacing* will find him- or herself confused about the protagonist’s life situation. Already on page two, the narrator subtly informs

¹⁵⁹ Atwood. p. 93.

the reader of her marriage, as Joe is holding her hand in the car, “fiddling with [her] gold ring”¹⁶⁰. A couple of pages later, the narrator claims to be divorced, as well as being a mother:

I sent my parents a postcard after the wedding, they must have mentioned it to Paul; that, but not the divorce. It isn't part of the vocabulary here, there is no reason to upset them. I am waiting for Madame to ask about the baby. I'm prepared, alerted, I'll tell her I left him in the city; that would be perfectly true, only it was a different city, he's better off with my husband, former husband.¹⁶¹

The reader therefore assumes that she has left her child and ex-husband behind in “the city”. This assumption is reinforced when Joe proposes to her on the island. The protagonist justifies her declination by saying that she has been married before. “I don't want to go through that again,” she explains to Joe. Then she thinks to herself: “It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back.”¹⁶² The fact that she seems to look at herself from the outside and her denial of what really happened in her past life points to the Laingian “divided self” theory of a schizophrenic illness resulting from repression of a traumatic experience. This traumatic experience is first hinted at when the narrator recounts giving birth to her alleged child:

[...] they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and then don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. [...] I won't let

¹⁶⁰ Atwood. p. 2.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p. 17.

¹⁶² Ibid. p. 80.

them do that to me ever again.

He wasn't there with me, I couldn't remember why; he should have been,
since it was his idea, his fault. But he brought his car to collect me afterwards,
I didn't have to take a taxi¹⁶³

In truth, the protagonist's alleged experience of giving birth is in fact the termination of pregnancy she underwent on demand of her lover. The intense brutality the protagonist describes can be explained that way. 'Technicians', 'mechanics' and 'butchers' are not professions one usually associates with childbirth or the delivery room. At the same time, the narrator refers to the alleged birth as being 'his idea, his fault'. The entire procedure is depicted as so utterly cruel and traumatic that the reader is appalled and begins to wonder whether the protagonist can be trusted in what she describes.

However, it is not until the second part of the novel that the reader realizes having been misled by the protagonist's fantasies. At one point, the protagonist discovers the body of her missing father floating in the lake, and the traumatic memory of what has really happened in the "city" suddenly comes back to her. It becomes clear that there has never been a marriage nor a delivery. These were merely constructions in her head, created in order to eliminate the pain and guilt she felt after having an abortion:

Whatever it is, part of myself or separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it.[...] I had been furious with them, I knocked it off the table, my life on the floor, glass egg and shattered blood, nothing could be done. That was wrong, I never saw it.

They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, [...] ¹⁶⁴

The father's action reveals to the reader that this suddenly reoccurring memory of her abortion and the earlier description of the supposed birth were one and the same event. "He hadn't gone with me to the place where they did it; [...] But he came afterwards to

¹⁶³ Atwood. p. 74.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 137.

collect me.”¹⁶⁵ The protagonist made a similar comment about her alleged ‘husband’ when describing giving birth.

The painful separation from her unborn child, which had been a great loss to her, is often compared to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The myth “inscribes the cult of the Great Mother”¹⁶⁶, who is fighting for the child which has been taken from her by means of male power. As the memory of her loss reappears, it becomes clearer how brutally the protagonist had been forced to undergo the abortion. Another novel, which addresses this theme of a child taken away from the mother is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The protagonist in *Beloved* takes her daughter’s life in order to spare her the dreadful fate of slavery, which she herself has experienced. When her former ‘owner’ traces her down, and she fears that her daughter will be taken by him, the mother decides that her daughter is better off dead than having to live as a slave. For the rest of her life, the mother is being haunted by the ghost of her daughter. In a striking parallel, Margaret Atwood has referred to *Surfacing* as a ghost story. Critics have wondered why, but similar to *Beloved*, the ghost of the lost child haunts the protagonist, and in both novels, the presence of these ghosts results in the madness of their mothers.

The Protagonist’s Madness: Schizophrenia as a Metaphor

Unlike in the other two texts, the protagonist of *Surfacing* is neither diagnosed as a psychiatric patient nor does she receive treatment for her condition. She is, however, undoubtedly struggling with her sanity. The repression of the abortion trauma, her constant lying, and her paranoia are all signs of the protagonist’s mental illness. The upcoming psychosis of the protagonist, the indicator to a schizophrenic disorder, is

¹⁶⁵ Atwood. p. 138.

¹⁶⁶ VanSpanckeren, Kathryn. *Margaret Atwood. Visions and Forms*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. p. 37.

foreshadowed early in the novel, when Anna looks at the protagonist's hands, asking whether she has a twin sibling, to which the protagonist says no. "'Are you positive?' she said, 'because some of your lines are double.'"¹⁶⁷ Even though she is never diagnosed as being mentally ill, the protagonist's behavior and her use of language reflect a "disorder of the mind"¹⁶⁸. Madness in *Surfacing* can be interpreted as a metaphor, standing for female repression. Accordingly, Elaine Showalter writes in *The Female Malady*:

Some feminist critics have maintained that schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of women's lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity.¹⁶⁹

As such, the portrayal of madness can be both a form of expressing female discontent and a literary metaphor used to draw attention to female dissatisfaction.

The protagonist's mental illness, showing signs of schizophrenia, reveals itself gradually in the course the novel. She has all but eliminated her memory of the traumatic abortion, and of her affair with the art professor. Both have been substituted by events, which never happened, like her account of marriage and childbirth. On several occasions she also mentions the drowning death of her brother, which we later find out has never happened, and which the protagonist would not be able to remember anyway as she had not even been born when her brother almost drowned. A state of repressed memory as convincingly portrayed in Atwood's novel may result from any type of traumatic event that is unconsciously retained in the human mind, where it is said to adversely affect conscious thought, desire, and action. Most psychologists would agree that is quite common to consciously repress unpleasant experiences, even sexual abuse, and to

¹⁶⁷ Atwood. p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Woodcock. p. 33.

¹⁶⁹ Showalter. p. 213.

spontaneously remember such events, in some form or other, long afterwards. In the novel, the protagonist realizes that something is wrong with the memories she has:

I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong, the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too... To have the past but not the present, that means you're going senile.¹⁷⁰

Similar to Esther Greenwood, the narrator of *Surfacing* feels like she is not quite in touch with the rest of the world. She describes her own “bell jar” as something covering her eyes, a feeling which she experienced while she was using birth control : ““I couldn’t see [...] Things were blurry. They said it would clear up after a couple of months but it didn’t.’ It was like having Vaseline over your eyes but I didn’t say that.”¹⁷¹ Furthermore, the protagonist experiences a kind of isolation from her surroundings in an emotional way. She realizes that she is not capable of the kind of emotions that the people around her are, especially her boyfriend Joe, who is throughout the entire novel struggling with his emotions. He wants to intensify the relationship with the protagonist, and he asks her to marry him. Her constant inaccessibility troubles and hurts him, at the same time as it worries her. “His face contorted, it was pain: I envied him.”¹⁷² Just like Esther Greenwood claims she feels “numb”, the protagonist of *Surfacing* realizes that she is incapable of any emotions.

The emotional detachment of the protagonist gradually alters into a psychotic state of paranoia and sense of separation in the course of the novel. She becomes increasingly suspicious of her friends, even of her lover. When David follows her into the forest, she feels that he is “shadowing”¹⁷³ her. Her reality perception seems increasingly blurred, as does her sense of self. Interpersonal communication appears to be a great

¹⁷⁰ Atwood, p. 135.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 73.

¹⁷² Ibid. p. 101.

¹⁷³ Ibid. p. 144.

effort to her. “I had to concentrate in order to talk to him, the English words seemed imported, foreign; it was like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interrupting the other.”¹⁷⁴ The protagonist’s paranoia increases gradually throughout the text. Early in the novel, the protagonist realizes that she does not recognize the area where she grew up, and this gives her a feeling of discomfort: “[...] but I’m starting to shake, why is the road different, he shouldn’t have allowed them to do it [...]”¹⁷⁵ Later, when her friends tell her about having recovered her father’s body, her response is clearly paranoid:

He and Anna glanced at each other: they had planned on hurting me...
Anna said, ‘Wouldn’t you rather...’ and then stopped. They walked back
down the steps, disappointed both of them, their trap had failed.¹⁷⁶

The protagonist continually believes that all the people around her are lying to her. David reports to her what the police officers have told him about where they have found her father and what they suspect has happened to him. Despite the fact that the protagonist knows where his body was, since she discovered it earlier, she does not believe what David tells her. She is once again repressing a painful memory, even of something she experienced only a few days earlier.

It was clever of him to have guessed the missing camera, since I’d told them nothing about it. He must have thought quickly in order to make it all up in such a short time: I knew it was a lie, he was doing it to get back at me.¹⁷⁷

The conviction that David and Anna are intending to hurt her is a clear sign of psychotic paranoia. “Convincing details”, the protagonist thinks to herself.

[...] if he could invent, I could invent also, I’d read enough murder mysteries. The detectives, eccentric hermits, orchid-raisers, sharp

¹⁷⁴ Atwood. p. 144.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 6.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 152.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 151.

bluehaired old ladies, girls with jackknives and flashlights, for them
everything fitted. But not in real life, I wanted to tell him, you've
outsmarted yourself.¹⁷⁸

Even though the protagonist of *Surfacing* never receives any kind of treatment for her supposed schizophrenia, she finds ways to help herself. One of these ways is reflected in her decision, conscious or not, to no longer try and fit in with her new friends, when she obviously felt alienated by them. As her memory resurfaces, she decides that what might help her is to get pregnant. Therefore, she persuades her lover Joe to impregnate her. That way, her lost child would finally be born and her wounds could heal. The conception of another child symbolizes physical and emotional recovery, and in a sense her own rebirth. The protagonist realizes that she has to finally free herself from the fake memories of marriage and motherhood. Therefore, she burns not only the drawings and sketches from her parents, her past, but also her gold ring. "I slip the ring from my left hand, non-husband, he is the next thing I must discard finally, and drop it into the fire, altar, it may not melt but it will at least be purified, the blood will burn off."¹⁷⁹ She is for the first time able to remember clearly. "I can remember him, fake husband, more clearly though, and now I feel nothing for him but sorrow. He was neither of the things I believed, he was only a normal man, middle-aged, second-rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions."¹⁸⁰ Akin to what is described in *The Bell Jar*, the motherhood of the protagonist can be interpreted as a sign of recovery and personal rebirth as a healthier and more content person. In neither case, motherhood is connected to fatherhood. We cannot be sure whether there Esther Greenwood is raising her baby together with its father in *The Bell Jar*, as there is no mention of a father. The protagonist of *Surfacing* seems determined to raise her baby on her own. This once again resembles the myth of

¹⁷⁸ Atwood. p. 152.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 170.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 182-3.

Demeter and Persephone, and the related strong bond between mother and daughter, while the father is not only irrelevant but maybe even the enemy. In that sense, these two texts constitute a clear opposite to the significance of motherhood in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. In the short story, motherhood is trapping the protagonist even more in the already highly restricted married life of the nineteenth century, as well as it is making her sick and therefore indirectly contributes to her losing her sanity.

The Women’s Movement in the 1970s had achieved massive improvements for the female part of the population, which resulted in significant changes in female lifestyles compared to all their preceding generations. Yet, women were still often trapped in dependent and abusive relationships. Male chauvinism did not appear to be as easily changeable and while the laws and rights concerning women and their position in society gradually changed towards a more gender equality, many men were holding on to their sexist views on women and expecting their wives, girlfriends or lovers to be obedient and servile. Margaret Atwood’s novel takes up the theme of male chauvinism in the relationships displayed in *Surfacing*, and by using schizophrenic madness as a metaphor for female oppression, she shows how harmful and painful living in a patriarchal and chauvinistic society is for women.

Chapter Four

The Significance and Depiction of Female Madness in the Three Texts

Female Insanity – Identity Crisis or Organic Illness?

A Question of Gender Identity?

[...] psychoanalysis becomes one of the places in our culture where it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all.¹⁸¹

This quote ties female madness to the refusal of a woman to ‘slip into the role’ she has been assigned to by society on account of her sex. Until recently, refusal to accept the gender role imposed by tradition has been evoked as cause of female madness. The three texts discussed in this thesis, in addition to the obvious common theme of female insanity as a consequence of the protagonist’s refusal to accept her traditional gender role, share another attribute: the question of female self-identity, and to what extent the concept of self-identity affects female gender roles. The obvious connection between self-fulfilment, personal identity and gender roles is addressed in all three texts and presented in context to female mental illnesses. According to Phyllis Chesler, insanity ensues from the failure to conform to the societal gender expectations:

What we consider madness, whether it appears in women or men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex role stereotype¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Rose, Jacqueline. “Femininity and its Discontents”. *Feminist Review*. No. 14, 1983. p. 9.

To a certain extent, the texts under discussion “place the blame for women’s schizophrenic breakdowns on the limited and oppressive roles offered to women in modern society”.¹⁸³ Like Chesler, Elaine Showalter is another prominent critic who claims that there is a strong connection between female insanity and the inability or refusal to submit to the cultural expectations concerning one’s sex. The complexity of the historical struggle for female gender identity is cogently described by feminist theorist Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*:

... there is the [...] problem that feminisms encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable of signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety. As Denise Riley’s title suggests, *Am I That Name?* is a question produced by the very possibility of the name’s multiple significations. If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.¹⁸⁴

Butler emphasizes the conflict that can be caused by a too fixed conception of gender roles. Like Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, or the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, a woman might feel that traditional gender roles and expectations do not apply or appeal to her, but that she is at the same time left without an alternative. As the God-given nature of traditional gender categories is taken for granted at the time the two texts were set, non-adherence to or even rejection of these categories are perceived as unnatural or even sick. Refusal to accept and to perform within the limits of a given

¹⁸² Chesler. p. 8.

¹⁸³ Showalter. p. 213.

¹⁸⁴ Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999. P. 3.

gender role has been considered a catalyst for the emergence of identity crises and mental illness. “It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must ‘adjust’ to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex [...]”¹⁸⁵, Phyllis Chesler writes in *Women and Madness*. Many feminist critics clearly believe in a causal connection between the degree of adaptation to traditional gender roles and female mental health. *Surfacing* presents a slightly different version of the connection between failing to fit into one’s gender role and female madness. While women at the time were not as tied to marriage and domestic life compared to in the two other texts, it was the male perception of what a woman should be and behave like that restricted them. Therefore, it was the failure to ‘adjust’ to the male image of what a woman should be like, an obedient, feminine sex symbol, which can be considered the cause of madness in *Surfacing*. Alongside these sociological reasons named by feminist critics, psychiatrists and psychologist had their own theories about female madness, some of which were connected.

Laing and the Anti-psychiatry Movement

R. D. Laing was a prominent Scottish psychiatrist who published several books on mental illness. His work *Sanity, Madness and the Family* was a leading study of schizophrenia in the 1960s. Laing maintained that “schizophrenia” was not an organic disease to be treated with psychosurgery, drugs, or shock therapy, but a social process that could be understood and treated only as a response to intervention with family ‘transactions’ and ‘interactions’.¹⁸⁶ Like the above mentioned sociological critics, Laing was convinced that madness was a manifestation of emotional distress, and he emphasised the role of both family and society in its development. Schizophrenia, he

¹⁸⁵ Chesler. p. 23.

¹⁸⁶ Showalter. p. 221.

claimed, could be the result of a problematic upbringing and difficulty in the home. In his book *The Divided Self*, he explains his theory of how the self-perception and the self-esteem of each person is dependent on other people's opinions. What he calls a sense of 'being in the world' is the feeling that one exists in order to be perceived by others. Laing's views of mental health have obvious ties to his political views, most notably those of Marxism. A person who is left alone to live his or her life in freedom will not experience any mental troubles, he claimed. In contrast, suppressed and people deprived of personal freedom would be very likely experience emotional and mental problems. Laing's theories seem to be easily applicable to all three texts. All three women described in the texts experience oppression and are deprived of personal freedom. However, Laing provides no proof for the claim that organic factors in contributing to mental illness can be ruled out. When comparing the texts directly in that context, it can be recognized that both the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and of *Surfacing*, who receive no treatment or are maltreated, end up in a psychotic state. Esther Greenwood, however, who received the medical treatment Laing rejects, evidently improves at the end of the novel.

Post Partum Depression and Schizophrenia

It remains controversial whether and to which degree mental illness may be triggered and influenced solely by unfavourable environments. "Hysteria", the condition affecting the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is no longer accepted as a medical entity. Rather, from a present point of view, it can be assumed that the young mother was suffering from post-partum depression. About ten percent of all women are affected by post-partum depression. In the article "Postpartum Depression. It isn't just the Blues", Cheryl Tatano Beck, Professor at the University of Connecticut School of Nursing, writes: "Postpartum

depression is a serious mood disorder that can cripple a woman's first months as a new mother." And she adds: "Without appropriate clinical intervention, postpartum depression can have long-ranging implications for both mother and child."¹⁸⁷ The causes of the postpartum depression are not, as claimed by many feminist critics and Anti-psychiatrists such as Laing, purely environmental, but there are clear indications to "hormonal, genetic and obstetric variables"¹⁸⁸ that contribute to the emergence of this serious condition. Its mostly organic nature is also proven by that fact that the postpartum depression occurs almost to an equal extent all over the world, in all societies, and in all cultures, and there is no relation to whether the child was planned and is born into stable family circumstances or not. A number of symptoms of post-partum depression such as "crying spells, insomnia, depressed moods, fatigue, anxiety and poor concentration"¹⁸⁹ are obviously reminiscent of the alleged symptoms of hysteria as described in "The Yellow Wallpaper". The former concept, which now is obsolete, included a number of additional symptoms. Today, these symptoms would be attributed to different and distinctive disease entities such as manic-depression, anorexia, schizophrenia and others. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the reader follows a young woman suffering from a slight depression in her development towards madness. For the informed reader, it is almost painful to accompany the narrator in her decline towards madness, knowing that her condition could have been mitigated or completely avoided had she only received timely and appropriate treatment. Patriarchal society, but also the low level of knowledge concerning female psychology can be blamed for the outcome of the short story. This also reflects Gilman's intention with the text. Having herself struggled with repeated depressions and most likely also post-partum depression, she

¹⁸⁷ Tatanto Beck, Cherly. "Postpartum Depression. It isn't just the blues." In *American Journal of Nursing*. May 2006. Vol 106, No. 5. p. 1.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p.1.

¹⁸⁹ Andrews-Fike, Christa. "A Review of Postpartum Depression" Primary Care Companion J Clin Psychiatry 1:1; February 1999. p. 9.

wanted to draw attention to the in her eyes dangerous mistreatment of the rest-cure, which Dr. S Mitchell Weir had been prescribing to a number of women.

Jane Ussher, who was quoted earlier, belongs to the group of feminist critics who also claim that female mental illness is exclusively caused by either failure to adapt to gender roles or by the abuse of women. In cases of clearly abusive male-female relationships with a high degree of dependence this may be true, but it appears less convincing in other situations. Ussher insists that all mental disorders experienced by women are caused and triggered by unfavourable social environments. At the same time, she refuses to acknowledge any kind of organic causes. In an autobiographical account she describes the mental illness of her mother, which she witnessed as a young girl. Because of this traumatic experience, she explains, she developed her longstanding interest in the field of psychology. She consciously chose not to attend medical school but rather to study psychology, which shows that she was biased even before receiving her education. She believes that the psychiatrist who treated her mother prevented her recovery by failing to recognize the 'true' cause of her depression was her bad marriage and her lack of good friends. She clearly rules out genetic factors as a possible cause of mental illness. It seems as if this childhood experience is the basis for her opposition to purely medical interventions:

For years, I wanted to know: to know what was wrong, what to do, how to help.

My inability to cure my mother in her earlier misery, to make her happy again, spurred me to seek solutions in an abstract, contained and academic way. Had the drugs and ECT been efficacious I might have turned to medicine, but the memories of those fearful days waiting for the slow recovery from the mind-numbing, body-breaking shocks created nothing but anger. [...]

But we never talk about this time. Perhaps the fear of madness is still with us, the shame which we did not know until the secret was made, so that the word 'madness' was never spoke. Perhaps we fear it will happen to us. That it is

“in our genes’. That one day too our nerves will snap.¹⁹⁰

One might question whether being scared of the fact that an illness might have a genetic component justifies the dominance of ‘nurture’ over ‘nature’. There is an obvious connection between Ussher’s mistrust of organic or genetic contributions to mental illness and her mother’s illness. The assertion that her mother has fully recovered, after having received both anti-depressants and ECT treatment, seems to rather prove the successfulness of the treatment. Ussher contradicts herself as she never mentions any other kind of treatment like psychotherapy, such that it must be assumed that the standard psychiatric treatments her mother received were successful after all, even if the improvement happened slowly and was a painful process for the entire family, both of which can be said about other effective treatments for various diseases. In the case of Sylvia Plath’s novel, it can be assumed that the applications of ECT therapy were successful as well. While her book is often considered anti-psychiatry, the patient eventually gets well due to the treatment she receives. In my opinion, the book stresses the importance of adequate treatment. While Esther does not get better with the cold and distant Dr. Gordon, she bonds with the female Doctor Nolan, who helps her battle her illness with a combination of empathy and medical measures. There is no doubt that Esther Greenwood has greatly improved at the end of the novel, since it is clearly depicted that way. Therefore, the author’s biography and the fact that Plath took her own life only months after the novel was written should not change the interpretation of the text, as this was the way the author chose to present her story.

In the medical community, schizophrenia is by now largely recognized as an organic illness, which is, however, often triggered by external factors. The word ‘schizophrenia’ derives from the Greek words *schizein*, which means ‘to split’, and

¹⁹⁰ Ussher. p. 4.

phren, which means ‘mind’. The condition is often associated with defective perceptions of reality. Moreover, “it is now generally accepted that schizophrenia is associated with structural brain abnormalities, with the most consistent findings being enlarged lateral ventricles and reduced medial temporal and prefrontal lobe volumes.”¹⁹¹ In addition to the anomalies of synaptic plasticity and abnormal brain maturation, adverse effects of unfavourable and stressful environments are thought to act in concert with a genetic predisposition. Schizophrenia therefore is a complex disease with numerous endogenous and exogenous factors playing together. I think that it is due to this multifaceted nature and the fact that schizophrenia is often triggered by external factors that Atwood chose a type of madness for her protagonist in *Surfacing*, which has many similar traits to schizophrenia. However, rather than describing a specific disease and its impact, Atwood uses certain attributes of schizophrenia in order to metaphorical depict the effects of male chauvinism on a young woman.

Literary Examination

In the following section, after having addressed the question of a possible connection between gender roles and madness, I should like to examine two factors of literary means of illustration of madness in the three texts. While the three texts are essentially different from one another, both stylistically and concerning their plot, they use certain similar tools in order to describe the one main theme that they share, female oppression and how it is reflected in female madness. On the one hand, madness is depicted in relation to certain environmental conditions and the presentation of space is essential to all three texts. On the other hand, the narrator’s point-of-view reflects individualized perceptions

¹⁹¹Pantelis, Christos. “Structural Brain Imaging Evidence for Multiple Pathological Processes at Different Stages of Brain Development in Schizophrenia.” In: *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, vol 31 no 3. p. 672.

of madness, as all three texts are first person narratives. I will examine why this point-of-view was chosen by the authors, and what its possible significance may be.

Confining Spaces: The Presentation of Space in Relation to Identity Challenges

All three texts deal with particular and confined spaces. The depiction of a given space serves as a tool for the construction of identity. While the first two texts present very confined spaces, the last text is less restrictive. Even though there is also a sense of confinement in *Surfacing*, not only through the contrast of wilderness versus the city, but also through the metaphor of water versus air, and in that context, the process of surfacing. The protagonist feels locked in, like she is under water, and being able to reach the surface corresponds to being liberated.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the setting, presumably a former nursery, is very significant for the events of the story. The protagonist is locked in the room, not physically, but she is ordered by her husband to stay inside. At the beginning of the text, the protagonist longingly looks at the park and nature outside the house. She despises the room with its horrible wallpaper. The rings attached to the wall and the barred windows create a prison-like atmosphere, in correspondence to the narrator’s perception of the room. However, her perception undergoes a development, which is related to the development of her mental health. As she grows sicker and sicker, she appreciates being inside the room more and more. She is fascinated by the wallpaper, which she was so much disgusted by when she first started staying in the room. At the end of the text, when the protagonist’s madness reaches its peak, she even locks herself into the room she had been forced to stay in and drops the key out the window. She no longer wants to leave the room and the outside world does not appeal to her anymore.

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath also uses metaphorical confinement to describe the emotions of the protagonist. The protagonist describes her emotional state by creating the image of being locked in under a bell jar. A bell jar is “an inverted cup-shaped chamber used in a demountable vacuum system”¹⁹². She is therefore trapped in a confined space. This confinement does not allow her to participate in everyday life as other people do. It reflects how isolated and different Esther feels from other people. The confining bell jar is finally lifted from over her head, when her condition improves, allowing the ‘sour air’ she was breathing to mix with that of the rest of the world. Therefore, recovery is also closely tied to space and confinement in *The Bell Jar*.

In Margaret Atwood’s novel, much akin to her depiction of madness, the significance of space and the sense of confinement appear more complex. This may be explained by the fact that it is purely metaphorical. There is one clear contrary in the novel. ‘The City’ functions as an opposite pole to ‘The Wilderness’. While the city, which is associated with over-crowdedness, confinement and pollution, represents the protagonist’s traumatic past, the wilderness, which stands for natural pureness, innocence and new beginnings, represents the protagonist’s recovery. Again, there is an obvious connection between the depicted places and the protagonist’s emotional and mental state. At first, she transforms from a city person to feeling at home in the wilderness. When the group first arrived at the island, she longs to travel back to the city and feels like a stranger on the island. After having faced and overcome the trauma of her past, and in line with her recovery, the protagonist feels increasingly at home on the island, even to the extreme extent that she chooses to stay outside in the forest rather than in the confined cabin.

¹⁹² *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*. New York, NY: Random House, 1992. ‘bell jar’

The motif of confinement in the three texts can be interpreted in several ways. Confinement was for many centuries used as an inhumane punishment for mentally ill people. In the middle ages, and also throughout the 19th century, people who were struggling with sanity were locked up in cages, dungeons or asylums. This act represents not only hostility towards but also lack of medical insight to mental illness. Confinement can also mean ultimate isolation from the rest of the world. This can be either physical isolation or a perceived, emotional isolation like what Esther Greenwood as well as the protagonists of *Surfacing* and “The Yellow Wallpaper” describe. The connection between confinement and madness is not only obvious because of the above-mentioned mistreatment or abuse of mental patients for centuries, but also in context with female madness in particular. In that respect, it represents the isolation and oppression of women by patriarchal societies.

Narratives Styles as Means of Claiming Authenticity

Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sylvia Plath had suffered from mental illness very similar to their protagonists’ experiences. There are many other parallels between their personal biographies and the stories they tell. By choosing first-person narrators for their texts, the voices of women speaking in the first person symbolize the authors behind them. Of course, a first-person narrative does not have to be autobiographical, but the form of focalization in the texts can be considered a means to support their authenticity. “The Story is presented in the text through the mediation of some ‘prism’, ‘perspective’, ‘angle of vision’, verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his.”¹⁹³ An internal focalizer intends to evoke a sense of trust in the reader. The author invites the reader to observe the unfolding story together with him, as if both were using the same looking

¹⁹³ Rimmon Kenan, Schlomith. *Narrative Fiction*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002. p. 72.

glass. However, can these narrators really be trusted, as they are obviously mentally ill? Atwood's narrative style is to "speak in run-on sentences which signal the disorder of the mind"¹⁹⁴, such that the reader is not really sure whether to rely on the descriptions. The narrations are "clouded by the protagonist's self-protective amnesia"¹⁹⁵. In fact, it is most likely and becomes obvious to the reader with time that all three protagonists are presenting versions of reality which are at times quite far from actual reality. Nevertheless, the narrators can be trusted since the main plot of the stories is about what the protagonists are going through. In that sense, they are more authentic than any other narrator could be. The point-of-view technique allows the reader access to the inner thoughts and feelings of a mentally ill person. While an outside viewer's depiction might be closer to reality, it would at the same time be less revealing and relevant. Therefore, the point-of-view can be considered a claim to authenticity. "This type of narrative voice is essential to *Surfacing*. Only because we are firmly located within her perceptions are we able to share the narrator's subsequent visionary experience"¹⁹⁶. In contrast to "The Yellow Wallpaper", where the narrator provides the reader with numerous direct quotes from the people surrounding her, the reader of *Surfacing* is denied an outside view at most times, and has to rely entirely on the narrator, who turns out to be unreliable as far as reality is concerned. While the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is unreliable as well, she still reproduces comments and actions of the people around her accurately, contrasting her own condition to the "sane" people around her. Sherill Grace writes: "Atwood's use of a first person unnamed speaker draws us into both the novel and the frightening visual world of her protagonist." She continues claiming that "[...] this first person voice is a trap. Because it is all we have, we tend to believe the voice until, of

¹⁹⁴ Woodcock. p. 33.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 33.

¹⁹⁶ Grace, Sherill. *Violent Duality. A Study of Margaret Atwood*. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1980. p. 99.

course, we discover the elaborate deception at work. We remain locked within the perception of an unreliable narrator [...].”¹⁹⁷

The usage or non-usage of names also represents a means of focalization in the texts: both in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and in *Surfacing*, the protagonists lack a name. The characters around them however, all have names, which intensifies the sense of isolation. Esther Greenwood is the only one of the three protagonists who has a name. Nevertheless, on several occasions, Esther chooses not to disclose her real name. She creates a sort of alter ego for herself, names her Elli Higginbottom and feels more secure when slipping into the role of Elli. “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Surfacing* provide the reader with little information about the unnamed protagonists. In accordance with their powerlessness, they are both depicted as fragmentary persons. In addition to not having a name, they also lack an outer appearance. Knowing little about the physical attributes of a narrator will mean that the reader must perceive them strictly through their narration. The protagonist of *Surfacing* struggles with lack of emotion. She envies her lover Joe for his ability to feel, as she realizes that her lack of this ability makes her a less complete person. The lack of a name with both protagonists can therefore be claimed to represent the lack of power and identity in the women.

¹⁹⁷ Grace, p. 99.

Conclusion

In comparing the three texts, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century females were rarely treated with humane kindness and medical expertise as one would expect in modern times. These misconceptions of female nature and female illness were not perceived and understood as such, but rather seen as consequence of the refusal of individual females to accept their “god-given” gender role, as their own fault. A female figure that revolted against her traditional role was quickly labelled as “mad”, regardless of whether she had experienced

post-partum or other depression, heard voices, or was ‘hysterically’ paralyzed; whether she was well-educated and well-to-do, or an illiterate member of the working poor; whether she had led a relatively privileged life or had been repeatedly beaten, raped, or abused in other ways; whether she accepted or could no longer cope with her narrow social role; whether she had been idle for too long or had worked too hard for too long and was fatigued beyond measure-she was rarely treated with kindness and medical expertise.¹⁹⁸

At different times in North American history, young, middle-class, white women have written accounts on either their own experiences with madness, or described that of other’s. According to Phyllis Chesler, this literature “almost qualifies as a new genre”¹⁹⁹. One of the questions I explored in this thesis is whether madness, as portrayed in these novels, is a specifically female phenomenon. From today’s vantage point, it is clear that madness is not an exclusively female complaint. In fact, it is experienced by both genders equally. However, “each sex tends to learn a different style with which it reacts to

¹⁹⁸ Chesler, p. 5.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 5.

whatever fact has produced the psychological disorder”²⁰⁰. Therefore, female madness can be considered a gender specific reaction towards oppressive and inadequate environments. The answer as to why female madness occurs as it emanates from the analyzed texts and by studying their social historical contexts, suggests that there are many reasons and causes, implicating both nature and nurture. In some instances, such as post partum depression, there might be primarily organic factors as the underlying cause. In other instances, emotional abuse and oppression may trigger a biological disposition. This abuse can be multifaceted, such as pressure by society to be and live in a certain, restricted way, or other forms of abuse, such as domestic violence or sexual abuse. An important factor seems to be the medical mistreatment due to what Chesler calls lack of ‘kindness and medical expertise’. Despite their class and skin privileges, each of the three protagonists of the three texts discussed in the thesis was affected by an obvious combination of extrinsic and intrinsic causes that severely threatened their physical and mental well-being. Most importantly, the three texts provide a massive critique of the patriarchal society that has been at the root of American culture at the time, linking different forms of female madness clearly to the oppression of women. Eminent psychiatrists of the time such as Freud and Laing both attempted to explain emotional and mental problems of women as primarily gender specific. In contrast, critics such as Elaine Showalter and Phyllis Chesler associate the high prevalence of hysteria and “female madness” to the male-dominated structure that characterized North American society in the nineteenth and also the twentieth century. In comparing these opposing views from today’s vantage point it appears that Freud underestimated and Laing overestimated the force and power of external factors that manifest themselves in psychosomatic disease in a sensitive and emotionally competent population, i.e. females.

²⁰⁰ Chesler. p. 99.

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